

“Live and Let Learn”
Student Perceptions of Educational Stratification:
An Arts-informed, Narrative Inquiry

By

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Thesis

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Dedication

To my parents,
Jack & Shirley Greenough

For your strength and support,
Your commitment to family and community,
Your unwavering demonstration of love and kindness,
and for your advocacy in standing up for your children so that
they could one day stand strong.

My life is beautiful,
because of you.

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“No one is born fully formed: it is through self-experience
in the world that we become what we are.” — Paulo Freire

Abstract

This inquiry offers adult students an opportunity to story their childhood experiences within urban public schools in Atlantic Canada (Nova Scotia and New Brunswick) to seek a greater understanding of how student identities are shaped through participation in public education. An ontology of critical pedagogy and an epistemology of anti-oppressive/strengths-based discourse is used to co-construct researcher and participant accounts of school story. Creativity and depth of conversation is invited through usage of arts-informed, narrative methodologies to inform person-centred dialogue; with collage making serving as the introductory method to open researcher and participant exchange. Space is given to enable the participant articulation of their story pictorially, thus unconventionally. The purpose of this inquiry is to glean insight into the personal impact of school-based oppression (named in this study as *educational stratification*) from the perspective of the student participant. This study likewise serves to facilitate and demonstrate anti-oppressive possibilities within research, learning, and relationship in spheres of scholarship, pedagogy, and beyond. Most importantly, student voice is invited to inform and possibly reform education practices.

Keywords: Ableism, Anti-oppressive pedagogies, Arts-informed research, Asset-based pedagogies, Colonialism, Critical pedagogy, Deficit thinking, Educational stratification, Inclusive education, Narrative research, Strengths-based pedagogies

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CHAPTER ONE: RESEARCHER REFLEXIVITY SHAPES STUDY CONTEXT

This study asks adult students to provide commentary on their childhood learning experiences in urban public schools (K-12 education) within the Atlantic Canadian provinces of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick. To position the flow of this project, this first chapter serves as an extended prologue, giving space for researcher story/reflexivity. Told with a critical gaze, I position this research through the telling of my own school story as I draw attention to and critique school constructions that purport and maintain the values of *ableism*. I likewise invite school stories from three research participants (Mary, Carly, and Ella) to discover the common threads, themes, and experiences visible across stories. Student messages received from engagement in the public education system, or “story-o-typing,” (Randall, 2014) are of paramount importance to this study. The naming *educational stratification* as an oppressive practice is of equal importance to this study as it serves to compartmentalize learning expectations and generates bias relating to judgements of ability, academic capability, and achievement (Battiste, 2013; Powell, et al., 2024).

Anti-oppressive Methodologies

The methodologies I use to represent the data draw from narrative approaches to invite and construct the telling and retelling of personal story. The creative power of arts-informed research is harnessed to honour all features of the research process and its representation. The arts stand as fully anti-oppressive as they counter positivist forms of knowing. They likewise provoke an emergent process, which I take forward throughout the entirety of my project. I interpret, represent, and restory participant narratives (told initially through collage, art installations). Taking from Freeman’s (2020) perspective, I embrace the “messiness of research” that collage enables, emphasizes, and values, as I attempt to “work out what to do with a diverse set of fragments of information” (pp. 337-338). Indeed, “collage—by its process—is a layering

of theoretical, artistic, and intersubjective knowledges” (de Rijke, 2023, p. 4). Hence, I use arts-informed, anti-oppressive research to engage authentic participant voice and as I take inspiration and abstraction from inexplicit or ethereal sources of information (collage installations). I attempt to use the intangible in this regard to tangibly put into action the tenets of anti-oppressive (Kumashiro, 2000b, 2001), culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogies (Gay, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995). This endeavour pays tribute to a loosening of the boundaries and constructs of traditional education and gives space for alternative forms of personally meaningful language/expression. As such, personal sovereignty is sought through collage making providing the participant with permission to claim authority or authorship of their school stories. It could be said that within the traditional model of education, personal stories are often told for us or to us (Randall, 2014); our collage assembled or put together by others on our behalf, with meaning made for us by those who propose they know better. In contrast to this ontological positioning, encounters with the arts support diverse learners and researchers to access authentic voice, which enables responses to questions that help us uncover, learn, and know. Student voice is indeed an essential feature of this work allowing for perceptions of marginalization to be uncovered through storied and restoried narrative, arts-informed knowledges (Cole & Knowles, 2008; Eigenbrod, 2010; Hutcheon & Lashewicz, 2020; Riessman, 2001). Participants are offered space to share the oppressive messages they received in public school conveying how these messages informed their experience of school and thus their identity.

I seek permission and take allowances for unencumbered writing through this first chapter as I tell my personal story and as I describe how I came to this work. Recognizing the importance of clarity and structure for the reader, *Chapter 2* aims to address the organization of my dissertation to provide the reader with an overview of the focus and purpose of the study, the

significance of the study, and provides a blueprint for the assemblage of sections and chapters that make up the fullness of this scholarly endeavour.

Researcher Reflexivity

I offer my personal story shortly, in the context of applying a critical research paradigm, to invite transparency concerning personal bias or researcher subjectivity, allowing for an opening and an understanding of the researcher and personal motive and vantage; "...critical researchers frequently announce their partisanship in the struggle for a better world" (Kincheloe, McLaren & Steinberg as cited in Denzin, Lincoln, 2011, p. 164). While researcher reflexivity likewise imparts a greater probability of trustworthiness and ethics in research given that, "The researcher acknowledges how their own experiences and contexts inform the processes and outcomes of inquiry" (Etherington, 2017, p. 86). In keeping with this expectation, critical research likewise encourages researcher values to be overtly expressed, as Ponterotto (2005) explains:

Criticalists ... admittedly hope and expect their value biases to influence the research process and outcome. More specifically, because critical theory concerns itself with unequal distributions of power and the resultant oppression of subjugated groups, a preset goal of the research is to empower participants to transform the status quo and emancipate themselves from ongoing oppression. (p. 131)

Morrow (2007) supports and comments upon the issue of researcher subjectivity when developing and conducting trustworthy research. The social context and positioning of the researcher is made clear to position the influences and reasoning behind the inquiry and to,

... provide ...the reader with an understanding of the relative privilege and power held by the investigator and participants, as well as shedding light on the worldview of the

researcher or the lens through which she or he views the participants and the phenomenon of interest. (p. 215)

Critical Pedagogy: Possibilities and Provocations

Critical pedagogy opens space for a critique of dominant ideologies, historical traditions, and concepts that inform and shape cultural norms, values, and social practices in schools. In critical research, the idea of a reified truth is confronted, discussed, and questioned. Using a Freirean (2000) orientation, my research project encourages dialogue and supports research participants to "...begin thinking about their own thinking" (Kincheloe, McLaren & Steinberg as cited in Denzin, Lincoln, 2011, p. 164). This approach acknowledges and empowers marginalized voices "... to co-recover and interrogate a shared memory and history while simultaneously enriching a social critique of the dominant social order" (Bagley & Castro-Salazar, 2012, p. 242). Merriam (2009) advises, "Critical educational research ... queries the context where learning takes place, including the larger systems of society, the culture and institutions that shape educational practice, and the structural and historical conditions framing practice" (p. 35).

Critical pedagogy by its nature can be provocative, perhaps because it pushes against objectivity and honours subjectivity tied to experience and worldview. A plurality of experience underlines multiple ways of knowing. This project supports this notion as personal interpretation makes information, or a collective of common experiences, malleable, generating possibility from an epistemological stance in question of ontological conditions. Timperley and Schick (2022) nicely offer a perspective that I share as I undertake this critique, as they write, "Thinking about the ontological frameworks in which our pedagogies are situated challenges us to confront the political and ethical implications of educating in a Euromodern framework" (p. 118). Indeed,

this study is a commentary on the political and ethical implications of maintaining a Eurocentric, White culture, thus producing and perpetuating racism/ableism in schools. Emphasis is thus placed on how White values serve to inform frameworks used to structure K-12 education systems. The current, broadly accepted understanding of ability is based on societal structures and an adherence to ableist frameworks that perpetuate structural and individual bias in the assessment of all students, who are thus measured against a White, able-bodied standard (Hutcheon & Lashewicz, 2020; Smith, 2004, Thompson, 1999). Smith (2004) posits, “Whiteness is a normative, dominating, unexamined power that underlies the rationality of Eurocentric culture and thought. It serves to push to the margins not only those defined as not-White, but also those defined as not-Able” (para. 2). Hence, a White construct of ability imposes disability/diversity onto others given an intolerance for variation of personhood, or personal and cultural expression, or the freedom to participate or be heard if one should fall outside of whiteness or White spheres of power (Smith, 2004). Di Angelo (2011) speaks of how “... racially coded language reproduces racist images and perspectives while it simultaneously reproduces the comfortable illusion that race and its problems are what ‘they’ have, not us” (p. 55). It can then be said that vulnerable groups are deemed vulnerable because White culture makes them so.

Naming My Privilege: My Whiteness

As a White woman, I want to make my privilege clear at the forefront of this work. I also want to state that I am not trying to pose as a White saviour or to come off as virtue signalling in self-purported benevolence. I certainly do not have all answers, and I have my own work to do as I enlighten myself through listening to the voices that know from first-person experience. I acknowledge that as a White person, by sheer birthright and heritage, I am part of dominator culture and I too am an oppressor because I hold power in a society that is weighted in my favour

(DiAngelo, 2011; Fine 1997; Frankenberg, 1993; hooks, 2003). White people do not and cannot know the inequalities, inequities, and prejudices experienced by people who are members of visible minorities in our culture; and there are many levels of real and felt intersecting discriminatory perspectives and practices that serve to disadvantage people in a culture constructed to uphold the White, Eurocentric status quo and associated values.

To begin to understand diverse perspectives, many scholars have discussed the importance of democratic, dialogical processes (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 2000; hooks, 2003; Gay, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Kumashiro, 2000a, 200b, 2000). In constructing dialogical research, I acknowledge my inherent bias given that I, and all peoples, have been indoctrinated into a Western world that supports racist/White supremacist values. As such, this is my attempt as a “liberal white” to discuss the racist underpinnings of education systems, while also humbly admitting and owning that “...liberal whites who are concerned with ending racism may simultaneously hold on to beliefs and assumptions that have their roots in white supremacy” (hooks, 2003, p. 30). My project, a partial work at best, will no doubt contain omissions and lapses on my part as I look through White eyes. Stokke (2023) claims by “Using rationalistic argumentation disconnected from personal experience, emotions, and behavior, Whites are largely unaware of how they unconsciously exert racial dominance through imposing Eurocentric perceptions of reality and showing dominating behaviors” (p. 1555). I will do my best to name my bias as I position this work in what is known and what is yet to be known, or perhaps what cannot be seen or observed based on a privileged set of assumptions I carry. Yet, I proceed just the same as possibly our best chance and hope at change within systems of injustice and bias is through proclaiming our biases in an attempt at reconciling or making right the historical injustices. Madina (2020) explains this approach as they write, “A critical critique

invites the process of naming, identifying, and interrogating belief systems, practices, policies, and systematic structures as a means of dismantling and transforming” (p. 118). While hooks (2003) writes, “To build community requires vigilant awareness of the work that we must continually do to undermine all the socialization that leads us to behave in ways that perpetuate domination” (p. 36). It is the gradual process of unlearning our racist tendencies through actively inviting and hearing from marginalized voices in transformative dialogue that helps us better understand ourselves and others. Indeed, expanding our awareness of diversity is perhaps our best chance at nurturing compassion, change, and understanding (Stokke, 2023).

Introduction to the Researcher: Professional Background

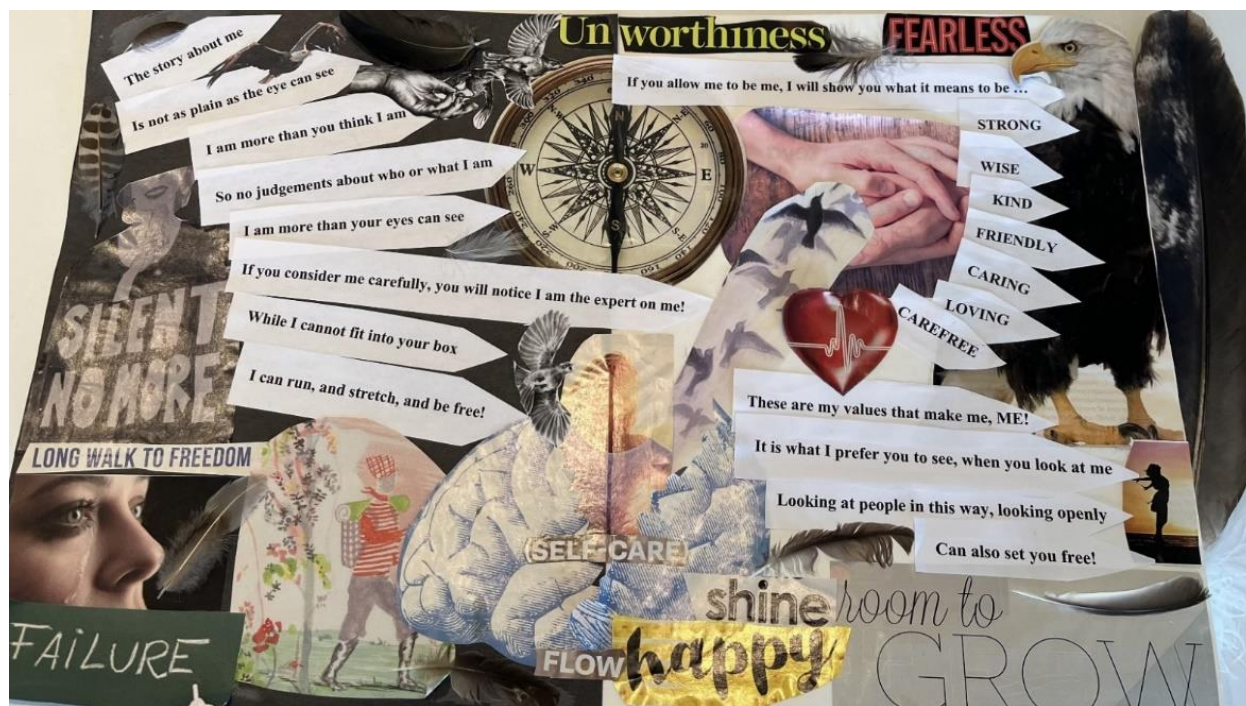
In keeping with the expectation of transparency and to position myself and my worldview, I name my personal and professional epistemology to situate this endeavour. My experience in the field of education spans 25 years in the Halifax Region of Nova Scotia. I have worked at all levels of education, with youth and adults, as a teacher in private and public schools (elementary, middle, and high school levels), as a professional school librarian, as a college and university counsellor, a career development specialist at various post-secondary institutions, a school counsellor, a part-time faculty member within a Master of Education program, and most recently as the School Counselling Consultant for the Province of Nova Scotia, Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. I have indeed held positions with much responsibility, and I cite my privilege here in unambiguous terms. The professional experiences I have enjoyed and benefited from underpin my interest in undertaking this research project just as much as my own very personal school story I recount next. I offer my story to provide context and clarity on my lived experience and to answer the question of “why” I undertake this research.

Setting the Study Context: My Personal School Experience

I incorporate an example of my own collage representation below (*Figure 1*) which has assisted me in writing this very personal account of school-based oppression and marginalization. It encapsulates and portrays my own experience in school as I have evolved from being a marginalized student to an empowered adult. In the collage, note the juxtaposition depicted between marginalization and empowerment which has come from personal growth, development, and an understanding of the ontological forces at play in our world and how this construct shapes and informs personal identity and experience.

Figure 1

Personal collage example representing experience in schools



My collage example is also meant to exhibit how creativity can be harnessed as an alternative, imaginative mode of expression or visual telling of personal story. It provides an early illustration of my usage of the arts to harness alternative modes of expression and voice,

allowing for inherently post-structuralist, unconventional, and personal accounts of story to be told pictorially. The arts emphasize uniquely individualized opportunities for expression as it values and demonstrates forms of plurality within communication. This project is intended to create an opening, giving space, and allowing for seeing with new eyes. It invites meaning making providing for deeply personal enunciations of lived experience using the creative arts – A language of instinct and intuition that reaches into the deepest crevasses of our internal selves to convey what sometimes cannot be said, written, or otherwise expressed.

I begin with my experience as a child in the public-school system in urban Nova Scotia where I felt marginalized as result of my learning presentation, physiology, and because I have a physical impairment related to my arms. In reference to my physical impairment, from a medically defined standpoint, I have congenital (from birth) arm malformations affecting both of my arms. In medical speak, my arm malformations or deformity is called *bilateral congenital radioulnar synostosis* (Tsai, 2017), which means the radial and ulnar bones in my forearms (between my wrist and elbow) are fused together and fixed at the elbow joint, preventing me from turning or pronating my arms. Because they are fixed in one position, I am prevented from having the full function of my arms, meaning I cannot turn my arms upward to show my palms. My arms are instead fixed without flexibility and that is palms down. I can bend my arms, however, at the elbow joint, which does allow some ease of use. Apparently, this birth defect is very rare, with only 350 known cases being recorded worldwide in the medical literature to date. As such, people are not familiar with my condition and therefore would not necessarily know that it exists or how to recognise it. With that said, I count myself very lucky to have arms, but my birth defect has impacted my interaction with the world and how the world interacts with me.

I give an account here to inform my lived experience of having a physical disability, so to speak, and how this has shaped my worldview.

Growing up as a child with a rare birth defect/abnormality, or “crooked arms” as I would tell people in my childhood when people would ask, “what’s wrong with your arms?” has changed me as a person and has impacted how I look at disability. When I was very young, perhaps before the age of five, I never contemplated the idea that anything was physically wrong with me. I had siblings, but I was not truly aware of my difference. My parents normalized and supported my way of being. Thus, I was contented as a child and viewed myself as “normal.” But as I grew older and interacted more regularly with the world, my arms and how they are positioned most definitely garnered interest from others, especially as I negotiated growing up and being in school. Indeed, soon after entering elementary school I discovered that doing some things was harder for me than my peers. With the introduction to new people, I began to realize that I was a bit different than my classmates. Holding objects was awkward for me because I could not turn my arms to hold things in them properly. That meant the act of holding or reading books, catching a ball, or taking and carrying small items in my hands, like accepting coins, among other regular, everyday tasks, was difficult and often awkward. The physical act of writing looked different too. I could not write on the flat surface of my desk because my arms do not have the flexibility to do this basic task. I would need to place my paper on a book and slant it upward, anchored on my lap so that I could print or write.

Gym class posed a more difficult maneuvering. I could not throw or catch a ball easily or correctly, which meant that no one wanted to have me on their team. I would dread when the teacher chose two or more of my classmates to pick their teams and, every single time, I was the last student selected. I knew that people were reluctant to be “stuck” with me. It was

excruciatingly uncomfortable, but more uncomfortable still was the act of participating on a team, when the taunts would come from some the boys in my class. I recall them pointing and laughing at me as I tried to participate to the best of my ability. They would also brazenly come up to my face and make exaggerated movements with their hands and moan, as though to indicate that I was different or deficient. Some of them would yell derogatory words at me as I attempted to participate. Every day I had gym class I would hope we were playing soccer or some other sport that didn't involve using my upper extremities. Enduring verbal harassment through my elementary school years took its toll on my wellbeing and as I entered junior high school, I would almost always bring a note from my mother to excuse my participation in gym class. Some may think that my mother's notes of excuse enabled me to sidestep or avoid my responsibility as a student to learn, adapt, and to be a well-rounded student; but for me it was the merciful protection I needed to keep myself feeling safe amidst the pending threat of participation. I would instead hide away on the gymnasium stage and watch my class safely from afar. And as I peered out watching the activity all around me, I often felt angry at myself for being different, but also angry at the school because I felt deficient and problematic. And I was punished for my difference by taunts from my peers while likewise feeling shamed by my teachers for not pushing through, despite feeling uncomfortable or being verbally violated by my classmates. I could not change myself, even though I very much wanted to, and the school system and the people in it would not change for me. *It seemed the school system and those in it were as fixed and immovable as my arms.* Indeed, a theme of rigidity resounds on many levels for me as I look back on my school days.

Today, as an adult, I still struggle with my arms. Truth be told, my arms continue to cause unease within me given that I have limitations in what I can do, both personally and

professionally; and because I look different and interact with the world a bit differently too. Indeed, standing in front of a crowd and maneuvering in a classroom makes me feel like I am a little girl back at school again. I recall one time being asked by an adult student in my class, “what happened to your arms?” as I once again experienced a calling out in front of my class. As an adult, I am also struck by the fact that school systems have not changed. I say this in reference to the physical expectations and assumptions that are made everyday about ability in our systems. From large to small things, the assumption of ability ties to broad assertions that everyone is the same (or perhaps everybody should be the same by assimilating or somehow conforming to expected norms).

I recall a recent staff meeting at a school where I was working in 2020. At this staff meeting we were requested to participate in a ball throwing exercise. It was meant to be a team building strategy with my fellow teaching peers. We were asked to form a circle and toss the ball to each other. As I received this direction from the school principal I was taken right back to the horror and anxiety I felt so regularly during gym class in childhood. All my insecurities at that moment came flooding back. Eager to save face and avoid feeling foolish and incompetent in front of my peers by participating in this basic yet difficult exercise for me, I chose to assert my own needs, and I politely removed myself from the activity. The school principal did not consider that perhaps someone in the group may not be prepared or able to participate. For me as I think about disability from my own experience with it, I have come to recognize that many differences are very real but not immediately visible or apparent to the outside world. What does this say about the many students in classrooms who are expected to participate in activities, yet their innate way of being legitimately prevents them from comfortable participation in the request. Why do we expect or think that everyone is or should be the same? Moreover, why do

we measure people by the same standards? How do these broad assumptions of ability impact the psyche of those who are just built differently?

My Biggest Secret and Source of Hidden Shame: Vulnerability Becomes a Strength

I speak now of an experience that began for me when I was 13 years old entering puberty and continued until I was 30 years of age. In saying this, I am going to disclose a secret I have kept from the world. A secret buried deep within myself only known by those closest to me. In making this disclosure, I hope it helps the reader fully understand why I have been brought to this study and why I view the world as I do. I have kept this secret throughout the entirety of my life to now because it ties to childhood trauma, stigmatization, and thus shame. That said, I speak it here to position this study and to invite understanding rather than judgement. I likewise speak my truth now given the bravery displayed by the research participants (Mary, Carly, and Ella) who agreed to participate in my study. I feel truly inspired by their courage as they openly and poignantly expressed their personal stories of school experience. Told from the vantage of being an adult, in reflection of childhood experience, these stories unearth artifacts from the past. Indeed, they are relics of the mind. Yet they sit just below the surface, so often activated and re-activated in the face of adversity, difficulty, or challenge. But when brought to the surface to be heard and witnessed, we can benefit from hearing all voices and accounts of school story as we gaze upon difficult experiences in a new light with gentle eyes. Unburdening ourselves, and enlightening others in the process, shaking loose the dirt from the past. Transmuting the pain and replacing it with personal strength and illumination, inviting understanding in the safety of today. More easily told in adulthood because the passage of time helps fear to fade.

Growing up is a transition with many natural changes that are to be expected. Yet sometimes the unexpected happens overnight, literally shaking us to our very core. Recounting

this time in my childhood, I am brought to the year 1985. I fell asleep one night like every other night. Knowing myself as I do, I was probably stressing about something. We had just moved homes and communities and I was starting school at a new junior high. I was leaving my friends at one school and entering a new junior high where I knew no one. As I went to sleep one night in August of that year, at some point through the night I became aware of my family all around my bed. I could hear my parents frantically screaming at me to “wake up!” But I could not respond or communicate with them or return to full consciousness. They seemed off in the distance to me, unreachable. Indeed, I was trapped within myself as my body jerked, stiffened, and shook violently, completely, and out of my control. While I could emotionally feel the swirl of anxious familial energy around and outside of me, I was simultaneously focused inward, taken up with the physical convulsions and contortions I was momentarily experiencing. I was in an uncontrolled, or controllable state. It took several minutes for me to regain consciousness, and when I did, I was confronted with an incredible headache, immense anxiety, confusion, physical pain, and weakness from head to toe. I felt like I had just run a marathon. Every muscle in my body felt sore and stiff. It was truly an unusual feeling. A foreign effect from what should have been a peaceful, restful sleep. As I eventually returned to full consciousness, I soon would realize that my life as I knew it was forever changed. I would later come to understand that I had taken my first of many grand mal or tonic-clonic seizures. Eventually diagnosed months later with epilepsy and placed on anti-seizure medication that would become part of my daily routine for seventeen years thereafter.

For me, there was and still is literal physical and emotional trauma and fear from the experience of having a seizure disorder. With this diagnosis there is also the requirement of taking strong doses of anti-seizure medication with brain changing side effects that impact the

entire body. Thinking back to this time, my experiences of these medications made it very difficult to be fully alert and thus to pay attention and to learn with ease. Having epilepsy literally changed who I was, how I perceived myself, and how I interacted with the world. I became very aware of my weakness, and I also became acutely aware of how society views people who have it.

Like any other disorder of the brain, a mystery surrounds its malfunction, and a stigma attaches to those linked with a diagnosis of epilepsy (Mayor, et al., 2022). In blatant recognition of this stigma, my parents forbade me to tell anyone outside of the family about my diagnosis, thus unintentionally but fully introducing me to the concepts of fear and shame. I understood their urging to refrain from telling others about my predicament; they were only trying to protect me from judgement. Hence, my parents sternly cautioned me to never tell anyone about my “fits,” as my mother put it, out of fear that I would be viewed as deficient or cognitively disabled. Because I only took seizures at night while I was sleeping (also known as nocturnal epilepsy) I could and did adhere to my parents’ wishes.

I kept my epilepsy a strict secret, locking it tightly inside and away from the outside world. And while my secret of having epilepsy was kept to my immediate family and to myself, admittedly, I was somewhat protected from the overt judgements associated with it. That said, secondary judgements were still made and attached to me based on the assumptions so often pinned on a child shell shocked from the night before; I was dazed, quiet, unable to be fully present, and therefore underperforming in school. And no, people who take seizures are not at risk for swallowing their tongue, but they can injure their tongue by biting into it during a seizure, which makes talking and eating difficult for several days after; a tell-tale sign for me when I was not sure if I had taken a seizure, upon waking I would discover this injury. Perhaps

too much information, but I speak it only to convey and to assert that sometimes judgements from people and systems are way off the mark. You never know what is happening at home when someone walks through the school door. So many students have secrets and traumas they carry with them, and these personal issues and health concerns undoubtedly impact their potential to learn with ease.

As I entered adulthood with my hidden condition, more judgements came from work and social outlets, suggesting that I was too rigid or withdrawn. To explain, as a young adult having epilepsy, I was unable to consume alcoholic beverages given the sedative effects this would have in combination with anti-seizure medication. As a result, the inferences made by my peers translated into comments of being prudish or inflexible, or perhaps, at the very least, inferring that I was lame and boring. “You need to break out of your shell,” they would tell me. If only they knew as I lay sleeping many evenings my brain would go into hyper drive; and break out of my shell I did! Consequently, I would often stay away from social events to avoid being judged in this way. Moreover, as a young teacher who was often asked (and who always declined) the invitation to chaperone students on overnight school trips and events, I was harshly judged as someone who withheld making after-hours contributions to the school community. In truth, however, I was terrified of overnight ventures for risk of taking a seizure in front of the students and having to deal with the after shocks of my seizure disorder so publicly. The humiliation that might have come from this kind of after-school participation was too much to risk, not to mention potentially traumatizing for the unlucky onlookers taking in such an event.

Like many others who are neuroatypical, my childhood and early adult epilepsy was not visible to the naked eye, but it was very real, and it terrified me. It most certainly impacted how I felt about myself because I was not open and free to be wholly myself. I felt a sort of entrapment

being in a body I sometimes could not control. I also wondered and worried if my seizure disorder would change over time; would I start to have seizures during my waking hours? Having epilepsy changed me. I was someone different than I wanted to be and being that person felt completely out of my control. Most certainly, having this condition served to shape how others perceived me as well. With this neurological presentation and the medication required to manage it, and already being quite sensitive in temperament, I became increasingly sensitive to my environment, making it difficult to learn in classrooms and in groups. Instead of being able to focus on the subject at hand, I felt overwhelmed by the classroom environment and the fidgeting bodies around me. As a student, I was taken up with my surroundings in a bombardment of the senses where my body and mind attempted to cope with the energies at play; the fluorescent lights burning my eyes, and the classroom environment made up of noises and abrupt and frequent requests made by the teacher. With students and bodies on all sides of me, the close proximity of other students admittedly created an unease within me. My thoughts would dart from one person to the next, leading to a lack of concentration on my work. Instead, I was taken up with watching people. Being naturally curious about people and human interaction, I was interested in determining who may also be suffering, vulnerable, or struggling in some way, perhaps to soothe myself and to help me feel as though I was not alone in my discomfort. Adding to these sensitive propensities and challenges was my tendency to escape into my inner world where I could hide away in the freedom of my own thoughts. And, given that sitting for long periods was and still is excruciating, I often felt the need to get up, move – to walk away from the chaos of the classroom and the uncomfortable dynamic that came with it; to retreat to a quiet space of tranquility. I would often find myself fleeing to the bathroom, hoping to be the only person there even for a few brief moments where I could breathe, relax, and collect myself. I

knew that if gone too long I would be judged or penalized somehow, so I would hurriedly make my way back to the classroom chaos with my invisible mask of “normalcy” loosely affixed to disguise the turbulence and discontentment that existed within me.

Given the description of my neurological and emotional make-up offered above, I do understand what it is like to be perceived as different and I have quite obviously struggled greatly in public school classrooms, busy workplaces, and beyond. While extroversion is celebrated, perpetuated, and supported in schools, those with characteristics of introversion, sensitivity, and attention deficit, are penalized by the unwritten demand for an outgoing and agreeable nature given the narrow construct of learning environments. And, if one is struggling to cope within classrooms of twenty-five plus students, a label of disability, incapability, or even pathology is placed upon the struggling student. It seems to me a superficial assertion of judgement comes from educational systems as they view students through a narrow lens; judging whether someone can adequately manage and demonstrate success according to a set of prescribed learning expectations. Indeed, being too sensitive serves as a disadvantage given the long held acceptable and established practice of embracing noise and commotion in our fast-paced world.

Being an introvert and a highly-sensitive-person, or an HSP, as described in Elaine Aron’s seminal work (1997), I am among fifteen to twenty percent of the population who is environmentally sensitive and prone to “overarousal.” Highly sensitive individuals are recognized as having “sensory processing sensitivities” impacting psychological and physiological stamina. To explain, HSPs typically have:

sensitivity to subtleties, the arts, caffeine, hunger, pain, change, overstimulation, strong sensory input, others’ moods, violence in the media, and being observed, giving rise to a

stress response and difficulty emotionally or physically sustaining in environments where a lot is going on at once. (Aron & Aron, 1997, p. 361)

As I have negotiated my adult years, I have come to understand this phenomenon within myself and within many students I have encountered and have had the benefit of learning from. As an adult I have fortunately learned how to create the appropriate boundaries for health, homeostasis, and survival. If only I could have come to this realization in childhood, it may have prevented me from feeling inadequate and shame from being neuroatypical or at least being different, which meant that I did not fit into typical classroom conventions. Legault, et al. (2021) introduce and clarify the term *neuroatypical* as they explain it in reference to someone who diverges or deviates from the “neurotypical.” “Neuroatypical” suggests someone’s “cognitive profile” falls outside of the established norm (p. 12844). To this point, Legault, et al. (2021) have evolved the commonly used term *neurodivergent* to include *neuroatypical* given that it serves to emphasize an epistemological understanding or positioning. Thus, being *neuroatypical* stands in contrast to established developmental and psychological expectations of capability or neuro-typical norms. They go on to clarify further and explain that:

... terms such as ‘neuroatypical’ and ‘neurodivergent,’ ... should be taken as meaning ‘considered neuroatypical’ and ‘considered neurodivergent.’ Just as people are gendered, racialized, etc., they are ‘medicalized’ (or better: ‘psychiatrized’), that is conditions that are to a great extent dependent on the society to which they belong are made into essential features of themselves as individuals. We do not wish to essentialize the normative distinction between typical and atypical, but we want to refer specifically to those groups that are marginalized because their cognitive profiles differ from the established cognitive norm. (p. 12845)

Streaming Students: Themes of Yesteryear and Today

Given my neuroatypical predisposition and inability to easily concentrate in classrooms, I failed almost every test I wrote and was resultingly cast to the fringe of the classroom. In elementary and junior high I knew I was being streamed into classrooms with students who were deemed to have a lower level of ability. It has been noted in the literature that “Individuals compare themselves to specific (proximate and salient) reference groups, and their academic self-concept and sense of social status is based on their position relative to these reference groups” (Högberg et al., 2019, p. 161). This sort of school-based marginalization has left an indelible impression on me, giving me an awareness of my differences and leaving me with an imprint or perhaps a stigma I have been trying to shake throughout my adult life. Being labeled the quiet, sensitive girl who required reading and math interventions, not much hope was given to me.

As a young person taking in these messages of deficiency, I felt very insecure and unintelligent. By the time I reached high school, my grade 10 English teacher advised my mother that I should forego university study and defer to the general stream of classes. This teacher and others advised my parents that I would likely not achieve success in academic preparatory courses and thus be able to advance toward university-level study. Hearing this was very upsetting. As someone who valued learning and achievement, I had wanted and planned to enter university. There was no other option for me in my mind. That was my ultimate goal and destination. I felt a fire in me to prove her wrong. And I was fortunate in a sense; I had the privilege of having very supportive parents who believed in me. My father, being a teacher and school administrator, understood the system of education, and my situation in it. He offered me many ad hoc coaching and tutoring sessions over many evenings as I attended to my homework.

In fact, both of my parents served as my biggest supporters and cheerleaders. They offered me encouragement and the reassurance that one day, with hard work and persistence, success could be mine. I am not saying that I believe in *meritocracy* for everyone, which is a "...principle of merit, [where] rewards should follow ability and merit" (Harel, 2023, p. 264). I am saying that by receiving positive encouragement, it gave me hope as a young person of average intelligence who was trying to build confidence and to find her way.

Today, as I write this dissertation and as I complete this final task on my academic journey, I can now obviously say that I did find my way to university. Ironically and perhaps to the surprise of my English teacher, I majored in English Literature in my undergraduate degree and then pursued two professional/graduate degrees in library and information studies and in counselling. With three degrees and counting, I have proven my academic capability, and I am glad I chose to believe in myself (and believe my parents) rather than follow the urgings of my English teacher. Reaching certain developmental benchmarks by a specific age is not the measure of life success. Development happens over a lifetime. We are always changing and growing, from infancy to old age. Is the sole aim of education about preparing someone for a job? Could there be another aim we are missing? Are we preparing students to be fully human? (Freire, 2000); to reach their full potential by highlighting their deficits or weaknesses? In answer to these questions, I would like to better understand how school practices of streaming and stratification exacerbate childhood trauma, impact learning potential and trajectories, and student impressions of self/identity. I harness an understanding of these questions in my study using Randall's (2014) concept of "story-o-typing" discussed in greater depth in *Chapter 3*.

As I contemplate my story, I believe the ontological construction of society and schools has perpetuated systemic discrimination/bias thus creating barriers, hampering learning for me.

To this point, I believe I was stereotyped by my teacher. Certainly not intentionally, but indirectly by personal biases and beliefs, and systemic practices and expectations that propel and support a myriad of inequities and inequalities embedded in public systems. My teacher's assumption about my academic ability was false, deficit-oriented, and stratified me into lower expectations of achievement, while discriminating against my right to choose and to attend the class that appealed most to me and suited my aspirations. I had a right to remain in her class and fail, but I also had a right to try and succeed. Further, just because someone is not showing their true potential by grades 10 or 11 does not mean they are incapable of developmental progression at a pace that is best for them.

Early Themes Emerge

Several common threads or themes emerge from my story that are later recognized and revealed in the participant stories you will soon hear from Mary, Carly, and Ella (*Chapter 6*). It was not until after the research process, long after I disseminated the data and restoried the narratives from participants, that I reflected over my story in recognition of several common themes emerging from all narrative accounts contained herein. I briefly speak of two now (trauma and educational stratification) and leave the third theme (resilience) for later, discussed in the study findings (*Chapter 7*).

Theme 1: Childhood Trauma

The first theme noted in my story, and likewise apparent in the stories of Mary, Carly, and Ella, is that of childhood trauma, also referred to as *adverse childhood experiences* (ACEs). In truth, I have come to recognize later as an adult and through my practice as a school counsellor that what I had experienced in childhood and beyond was exposure to repeated trauma, namely from my seizure disorder. Childhood trauma, or ACEs, can impact learning.

Edge, et al. (2022) report, “Children with histories of trauma exposure experience a wide-range of developmental, social, emotional, and behavioral symptoms. The effects of traumatic life experiences can impact children’s ability to learn and function within the school environment” (p. 1). Goddard (2021), in her study of ACEs and trauma-informed care clarifies, ACEs are an “umbrella term to describe abuse, neglect, and traumatic experiences that occur under the age of 18 years” (p. 145). My trauma did not necessarily come blatantly from an external source, albeit my experience of the school system exacerbated my feelings of trauma; it came instead from within. From uncontrolled, unpredictable, unexpected, internal neurological events where my body would regularly inflict violence upon itself. Moreover, the medications I required to control my condition felt physically oppressive and heavy which increased my feelings of despair and distress in learning and in life overall. Trapped within my body in this way, I felt unsafe.

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are likewise recognized and reported on by all three research participants. To explain, Mary experienced health issues (fainting, diabetes) and family issues (family addictions and removal from her home); Carly likewise had a seizure disorder and was repeatedly bullied by her peers and beaten up regularly on her way to and from school; While Ella experienced insecurity within her home environment because of difficult family relationships and frequently moving homes and neighbourhoods. Coincidentally, as each participant later describes (*Chapter 6*), they share a common experience of trauma, exclusion, and a general theme of feeling largely misunderstood as they attended public schools, which served to exacerbate and cause further trauma. I take a direct quote from Ella to underline this point as she shared the following overarching message received from school: “You don’t know how to do anything right.” Ella conveyed she felt “bullied from both sides – students and teachers,” which negated her timely completion of high school and caused her to be weary and

untrusting of people in her life. Ella's disclosure of bullying is indeed a common theme recognizable across participant stories that will be fully illustrated later in storied accounts appearing in *Chapter 6*.

Theme 2: Educational Stratification – Identification of the Study Problem

The notion of streaming/educational stratification, noted in my story, leads directly to the problem posed. Hattie (2002) cites that, "Tracking is claimed to perpetuate social class and racial inequalities in the lower tracks, and is often considered to be a major factor in the development or maintenance of elite and underclass groups in society (Persell, 1977; Rosenbaum, 1980)." (pp. 451-452). Hatte (2002) extends his commentary by outlining some of the negative effects of tracking on students, as he offers:

.... tracking can often institutionalise students into a similar track throughout their high school experience; remove the advantages of peers of varying ability assisting each other, particularly low-ability students being stimulated and encouraged by more able students; assign a stigma to the lower tracks, which can operate to discourage these students; lead to teachers objecting to, or not wishing to, teach the lower-ability tracks; lead to minority and lower-class students being more likely relegated to lower-ability tracks; and mean that students in low tracks receive a lower pace and lower quality of instruction. (p. 451)

In contrast to this argument, proponents of educational stratification/streaming argue that it can be beneficial because:

... pupils learn best when they are exposed to learning content that is tailored to the ability, performance and need of each pupil. If pupils with different ability are placed in the same school classes, it is argued, then low-ability pupils will fall behind while high-

ability pupils will not be able to develop their full potential (Blossfeld et al., 2016). (Högberg, et al., 2019, p. 160)

Parker, et al. (2021) caution, however, that "...ability stratification is strongly related to the signaling power of school membership that fixes children to a prescribed educational pathway" (p. 343). While Strello, et al. (2021) report, from their review of 20 years of data on "tracking and different types of inequalities in achievement," that "... tracking increased dispersion inequality and social achievement gaps. Tracking was also associated with educational inadequacy ... In contrast, we found no evidence that tracking boosted performance levels." (pp. 157-158). Blossfeld, et al. (2016) conducted an international country-comparison looking at practices of streaming/stratification. Both formal and comprehensive (i.e. inclusive education model keeping all students together) were considered and showed that regardless of whether obvious or less recognizable or observable forms of streaming occurred, they conclude that all systems of education are underpinned or demonstrate customs and practices of educational stratification, particularly in secondary education.

Educational stratification, also referred to as streaming, is the problem taken up in this study. It will underpin the research conducted as it relates to systemic discrimination and bias faced by diverse learners in K-12 public education. Student/participants engaged in my study will discuss their experiences of being educationally stratified/streamed in the following ways:

- **Mary** (21-year-old) was streamed into an "alternative high school" because she was having fainting spells and could not be managed by her community school.
- **Carly** (45-year-old) was streamed into what was previously called "special education programming." Her learning took place in a separate classroom with a small group of her peers who were acquiring basic life skills.

- **Ella** (41-year-old) was on a full Individual Program Plan (IPP) who required resource support for reading and writing, and most other subjects.

CHAPTER TWO: OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Statement of the Problem/Focus of the Study

Given that *Chapter 1* functioned as a prologue to set the context of the study, this chapter (*Chapter 2*) serves as an introduction to the study as it gives the reader detail on the purpose, significance, and intent of the project. To begin, my study focuses on the *othering* of students in K-12 education systems who exhibit diverse learning needs and thus are consequently streamed into lower track courses, also known as *educational stratification* in the field of education. When referencing educational stratification throughout this study, unless otherwise indicated, I am referring to students who have been stratified into lower track course offerings or expectations. Powell, et al. (2024) "...argue ... that educational stratification is emerging at the core of social inequality in the 21st century, dividing society into graduates and non-graduates" (p. 36). Rosenholtz and Simpson (1984) provide a definition of stratification in the "classroom" that underpins the concern under exploration involving student ability in schools. They write:

.... 'unidimensional' classrooms – classrooms that narrowly define academic ability – increase the amount of stratification within them. By stratification we mean the hierarchical arrangement of students into groups according to status as determined by perceived ability. Students' performance levels, their perceptions of their own abilities, and their perception of classmates' ability levels will all be more highly differentiated in unidimensional classrooms. That is, these classrooms will produce greater inequality among students' perceptions of their own and others' ability levels than will "multidimensional" classrooms. (p. 21)

The thrust and intension of my project is to capture student perceptions of school experience regarding "unidimensional" classrooms that "narrow[ly] define ... ability" serving to stratify

students into lower academic outcomes and expectations and/or tracks them into courses or programs that undermine their self-esteem and impressionable self-concept; while likewise marginalizing their learning potential and career and life futures. To make clear, *the term educational stratification in my study is explicitly focused on the social inequities maintained through lower track stratification processes, and how lower tracking impacts student identity.* Vertical or upward stratification processes, while also problematic for different reasons – i.e., can be stress-inducing (Gaesser, 2018; Krafchek & Kronborg, 2019; Mofield, et al., 2016); create tendencies toward perfectionism (Grugan, et al., 2021; Speirs Neumeister, 2007); and generate the social and intellectual segregation of learners while privileging some learning styles over others, thus impacting post-secondary options (Banaji, et al., 2021; Lucas, 2001) – are not viewed as marginalizing given that they typically enhance post high school options and self-concepts under Western constructs of success. Nonetheless, educational stratification has been normalized in schools because it mostly functions as an unrecognized or hidden form of oppression/marginalization for those deemed to have a lower level of ability; or because of socioeconomic status, cultural background, or imposed on people who are otherwise neurodivergent or have what is deemed to be a divergent learning style (Blossfeld, et al., 2016; Johnston & Wildy, 2016; Powell, et al., 2024; Shifrer, et al., 2013).

Given the subjective nature of experience, students are deemed to be in the best position to answer directly whether streaming/stratification is beneficial to their experience, or not. My study places the adult student in the position of expert. They are asked to reflect on their childhood experiences in public schools as they claim authority or authorship of their school stories, noting that subjective contributions provide for greater clarity on the personal impact

educational stratification can have on shaping personal experience in school and on the development of identity.

Academic Marginalization as an Iteration of Educational Stratification in Schools

I take meaning from Werwath (2016) on his usage of the term “academic marginalization” to describe *educational stratification* as he posits:

Stratification processes lead some students towards a non-academic curriculum with the goal of only completing a high school degree or obtaining a small amount of vocational training after graduation, while other students are guided towards a more advanced curriculum that prepares them for entry into a baccalaureate program after high school ... High school course taking contributes to the *academic marginalization* of students who are given a less rigorous curriculum by not only influencing their preparation for college, but also their expectations for degree attainment. Recent research suggests that high school course-taking serves as a signal to students about their academic abilities, and students in turn adapt their expectations for degree attainment based on these signals.

(Karlson, 2015, pp. 5-6)

Educational Stratification

Like Werwath (2016), I have thought of streaming/stratification practices in this same way and have consequently framed previous iterations of this project through use of the term *academic marginalization*. Werwath (2016) positions academic marginalization within the realm of high school and cites, “Academic marginalization is operationalized using three measures: number of non-academic and college preparatory ... credits taken, lowered educational expectations, and number of course failures” (p. 13). Werwath’s (2016) orientation of the term works well from my critical standpoint as it offers a way to situate and succinctly position the

lower streaming/stratification of students as a marginalizing, oppressive practice in schools given that it restricts learning options and reduces post-secondary/career opportunities; while also potentially serving to devalue or reduce struggling, disadvantaged, or divergent learners to curriculum that does not allow them to reach their *full potential*, a commitment made in the Nova Scotia Inclusive Education Policy (2019). Shifrer, et al. (2013) report “educational stratification” produces “inequality in educational opportunities,” and happens when students labelled with learning disabilities (LDs), for example, are directed toward high school completion courses while their peers, deemed academically proficient, are registered for courses that are college or university preparatory (p. 658). According to Werwath (2016), his study found that academically marginalized high school students can experience an increase of depressive symptoms at mid-life. While Chan, et al. (2018) report that “Individuals who hold oppressed identities may experience discrimination, which may affect their self-esteem and lead to depression and anxiety.... Research has highlighted the detrimental ways experiences of discrimination have had a negative impact on psychological health” (p. 65). Further discourse indicates that self-determination and the joy of meaningful learning is removed in favour of Eurocentric meanings of success (Dei, 1996; Dei, 1998; Domoff, et al., 2023; Greene, 1995; Lund, 1998); as approaches to achievement are constructed by the privileged and are based on adult human production, and the marketization of the individual given a proliferation of neoliberalist policies and values in society and schools (Apple & Smith, 1991; Giroux, 2013; Patrick, 2013). It has also been reported that educational stratification, either by academic tracks or vocational tracks, orient students toward the level of ability they have been assessed and placed at by their teachers or by system recommendations (Blossfeld, et al., 2016; Mijs, 2016; Powell, et al., 2024; Shifrer, et al., 2013). Concern has also been offered regarding “...underprivileged and minority students’

disproportional allocation to vocational tracks means they are especially likely to internalize failure” (Mijs, 2016, p. 150). Yet proponents of educational stratification report that stratification can be helpful to poorly performing students because “...these pupils tend to face less difficult curricula, increasing the probability of performing better than average or anticipated, and to experience relatively lower demands and a weaker competitive pressure...” (Högberg et al., 2019, p. 161).

With that said, I use the term *educational stratification*, as it is most accessible and widely used in spheres of education and scholarship. The phrasing or word combination, *academic marginalization*, is largely inaccessible because it is a newer framing for *lower track educational stratification*. Thus, it needs further discourse from the field to give it merit and to show its applicability. And as I defer to the term *educational stratification* in my discussion, I reiterate the *lower tracking of students* is of concern because it orients students toward social and economic disadvantage while also marginalizing their learning and development potential and their right to self-determination. Powell, et al. (2024) refers to these students as “a left-behind class of people without qualifications and skills ... blaming themselves for their fate” (p. 36) not to mention that *educational stratification* has a correlation with poorer mental health outcomes and lower levels of self-esteem/self-worth (Chan, et al., 2018; McWilliams, 2017; Mijs, 2016; Pope & Arthur, 2009; Werwath, 2016).

Background of the Problem: Colonial Origins of Educational Stratification

If I may briefly situate the origins of educational stratification, it is rooted in colonialism and can entail many levels of stratification in society. Hemphill and Blakely (2015) confer, “educators operate within a system structured by modernity and colonialism, though the history and legacies of both remain largely unrecognized and ignored in the field” (p. 1). Practices of

stratification have ties to forced acceptance of colonizer beliefs and standards from European expansion into colonized nations, inflicting cultural genocide, forced displacement and assimilation onto Indigenous peoples who had their land appropriated, and their culture stolen from them (Battiste, 2013; Lowman & Barker, 2015; Masta, 2019). Colonial rule began after the white settlers' discovery and migration to new lands, beginning in the 1600s, that resulted in the sovereignty of Indigenous populations being overthrown with English and French colonial ideologies and ideals supplanting, suppressing and removing the rights of First Nations peoples to self-governance, freedoms, culture, community, identity, religion, language, and land. As Soldatic (2015) explains, settler values, beliefs, and ideologies pertaining to colonialism resulted in violent acts that were (and are) inflicted on Indigenous communities with a normalization of institutionalization, and thus,

Colonial white-settler legitimization, with its desire to cultivate white masculine power, aimed to normalize its strategic intent of stratifying settler body and mind relations into a hierarchical order (Bashford, 2004). It pursued pseudo-scientific ideologies via the biological juncture of health, medicine and science that permitted the administrative management of disabled and indigenous bodies and minds as two distinct sites of contagion (Bashford, 2004). Questions of able, fit, disciplined, industrious and productive bodies and minds, a vital component of both the white-settler enterprise and the colonial settler nation-state, always stationed disability and indigeneity at its door. (p. 54)

“It seemed the system and those in it were as fixed and immovable as my arms.”

I use my own quote above in reference to my personal story to underscore a system that is largely static. While de-colonization initiatives have been attempted over systems indoctrinated by colonialism, progress is slow with traditional preferences still adhered to in the

present. Dicks (2023) speaks of Indigenous scholarship that is often reflective of Canadian governmental influences where binary classification systems have whittled 600 Indigenous nations or groups "... into simplistic European-imposed categories [and] has resulted in a variety of complications and exclusions" (p. 261). Battiste (2013) extends, "Education, like the institutions and societies it derives from, is neither culturally neutral nor fair. Education has its roots in a patriarchal, Eurocentric society, complicit with multiple forms of oppression of women, sometimes men, children, minorities, and Indigenous peoples" (p. 159).

Furuta (2021) speaks of tensions between "formal educational institutions ... and the influence of liberal ideals" as he writes:

... at upper levels of schooling ... Formal standardized measures of merit continue to be important in shaping educational stratification at this level in most countries, but these selection mechanisms are delayed in the schooling process because they conflict with norms of inclusivity, egalitarianism, and access to education as a human right that shape conceptions of schooling (p. 97).

With inclusive education initiatives attempting to right historical wrongs in learning environments, we still have an education system that has been erected and maintained based on structural inequality, classism, racism, and stratification processes. Furuta (2021) cautions that:

In a world increasingly shaped by an underlying assumption of individual personhood, nation-states develop educational institutions that aim to both expand individual equality and allocate individuals into an unequal role structure in society (Furuta, 2017). In this context, the increasing importance of education in social stratification after World War II structures and legitimates this inherent tension in liberal notions of individual equality (Lerch, et al., 2020, p. 97). (p. 15)

Ingrained in Western belief and culture, “The history of the British measure is so long that it has taken on an aspect of self-justification” (Stewart, et al., 1980, p. 20). Stratification measures are so commonplace they often go unquestioned as being appropriate and right. Stratification in schools has been overtly linked with standardized testing, assessment criteria, academic versus vocational pathways, school selection, differentiation of learning, accommodations, et cetera, which serves to covertly stratify students academically, socially, and economically through a limitation of career options. Stratification relates historically to hierarchies created by a caste system that sustains systems of class based on cultural factors, gender, and family background. Powell, et al. (2024) comment at length about the oversimplification of the binary construct purported in Western world, as they discuss the complications of intersectionality and the “overlapping identities and experiences with prejudice and injustice shared across class, race and gender” (p. 43). They cite that:

... many axes of inequality that often work together and influence one another, or create distinct types of disadvantage ... are experienced in different ways. We also need to understand that ... a stratified society class from childhood plays an overarching role in the lived experience of working-class people by creating a ‘them and us’ social hierarchy ... encoding the normativity of privilege/disadvantage binary into our social structures and mentalities. (pp. 43-44)

Pierre Bourdieu’s seminal work (1986) on “capital” and “class” can be used to explain privilege in society, with the education system and academic achievement being central to his ideology of “cultural capital.” He explains how cultural capital exists in three states: The *embodied state* or “dispositions of the mind and body”; the *objectified state* or “cultural goods”; and the *institutionalized state* or “educational qualifications” (p. 17). Bourdieu (1986) makes his

argument outlining how culture can work to marginalize students/people due to the “unequal scholastic achievement of children.” Bourdieu expounds:

The notion of cultural capital initially presented itself to me in the course of research, as a theoretical hypothesis which made it possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success, i.e., the specific profits which children from the different classes in class fractions can obtain in the academic market, to the distribution of cultural capital between the classes and class fractions. (p. 17)

Powell, et al. (2024) speak of “...social justice as the key to unlocking educational stratification.” as they declare “...higher education brings significant social and economic benefits to individuals and society” (p. 36). Yet with education systems that serve to stratify learners based on class, Powell, et al. (2024) likewise report, “A significant body of research ... suggests that young people and families from disadvantaged backgrounds regard a higher education *habitus* as remote and alien from their experience ...” (p. 56).

Calling Attention to Existing Systemic Barriers and Discrimination Caused by Ableism

Many scholars in the field of education have called for action as they have named and discussed existing and prevalent systemic barriers in schools (Carrington, et al., 2022; Ciuffetelli Parker & Conversano, 2021; de Plevitz, 2007; Griggs, et al., 2023; Mampaey & Huisman, 2022). I cite Griggs et al. (2023) to provide a definition of diversity as those of diverse backgrounds and learning needs face barriers to learning. They clarify:

Diversity can exist within a person’s body, psychology, emotions, socio-cultural and racial backgrounds, society, policies, and so on. We hold that systemic barriers to learning are created when environments do not intentionally create opportunities for

people with diverse identities to access and participate in the learning. Worse yet, historically, systems have been shown to intentionally create barriers to learning for people with diverse identities. For example, learning environments have created barriers for people when they have needed additional support due to their physical, cognitive, or psychological diversity through: a lack of access to the same curriculum as their peers; segregated environments; absence of adequate accommodations ... society (not science) has simultaneously constructed identities (i.e., ability and race) and created unsafe environments that at best neglect and at worst weaponize these identities, preventing access to and participation in learning. (p. 15)

My study calls attention to the barriers created by social constructs of ableism set by the privileged in educational systems, and the inequalities and inequities caused by such constructs, despite current inclusive education initiatives. Wieseler (2020) succinctly posits that, “Ableism informs how society is designed, creating obstacles to not only the flourishing but also the very survival of some people while producing opportunities for others ... in other words, ableism informs social practices that disable and enable individuals” (p. 715). Keefe (2022) explains how ableism is anchored in our lives and systems through our use of “ableist language,” “ableist assumptions and expectations,” and “ableist program structures” (pp. 122-129). Charlton’s (1998) seminal discourse draws attention to a type of “disability oppression,” that stems from ableist social constructions and illuminates how the pathologies of disorder have been prevalent and acceptable approaches in view of students when categorizing ability and capability versus disability and inability.

In the case of schools, the diverse learner must interact with and attempt to conform to standardized notions of ability, capability, performance and success, or face educational

stratification into special or alternative programming and pathways (Burman, 2017; Charlton, 1998; Dejong & Love, 2015; Keefe, 2022; Reid and Knight, 2006; Young, 1990). Young (1990) clarifies how oppression can take various forms in society, originating from “tyranny by a ruling group” and “traditionally carrying a strong connotation of conquest and colonial domination” (pp. 40-41). She goes on to argue, however, that in modern society structural oppression is less about a tyrannical power taking hold and more about:

... the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society.... Oppression in this sense is structural, rather than the result of a few people’s choices or policies. Its causes are embedded in unquestionable norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules.... In this extended structural sense oppression refers to the vast and deep injustices some groups suffer as a consequence of often unconscious assumptions and reactions of well-meaning people in ordinary interactions, media and cultural stereotypes, and structural features and bureaucratic hierarchies and market mechanisms – in short, the normal processes of everyday life. (p. 41)

An Alternative Route: Inclusive Education for All Students

The potential of Furman’s (2021) commentary gives rise to possibility as she discusses an alternative route to inclusive education for *all* students. Inclusive education practices have evolved over the past 30 years from their exclusive use with special needs population and are now philosophies taken up broadly “...refer[ring] to the education of *all* children in mainstream schools ...” (Messiou, 2006, p. 306). Inclusive education initiatives, like most other well-intentioned initiatives, are in constant refinement and change. For example, it is now understood that “the concept of special needs is itself highly problematic,” as it can serve to exclude thus

marginalize students (Messiou, 2006, p. 306). The definition of inclusion has shifted from its initial intentions of supporting special needs students and now ties to issues regarding the prevention of marginalization in schools with the literature reporting, "... inclusion is concerned with any kind of marginalization that might be experienced by any child, regardless if this is perceived as being about notions of special educational needs or not" (Messiou, 2006, p. 306). Messiou (2012) clarifies this point by offering, "The emphasis is redirected, therefore, to promoting the learning of any child that might experience difficulties in a school context, rather than focusing on traditional categories of children that have been defined as having special educational needs" (p. 1312). Messiou's (2012) research with children shows, "... there is no single or definitive conception of marginalization and that we are rather talking about multiple conceptualisations of marginalization" (p. 1313). He goes on to name his research findings showing four conceptualizations of marginalization, which are:

...when a child is experiencing some kind of marginalization and is recognised almost by everybody including himself/herself; when a child is feeling that he/she is experiencing marginalization, whereas most of the others do not recognise this; when a child is found in what appears to be marginalised situations but does not feel it, or does not view it as marginalization; and finally, when a child is experiencing marginalization but does not admit it. (pp. 1312-1313)

Messiou (2012) cautions that "...these [conceptualizations] should not be viewed as robust categories into which any child who is possibly experiencing marginalization could confidently fall under, but rather suggestions for thinking about marginalization as experienced by children in relation to certain school contexts." (p. 1313). Mowat (2015) picks up on this sentiment and requests a broader understating of the term "marginalization." She suggests that we look beyond

current knowledge and the policies erected to address the current understanding or iteration inclusion, which she believes typically focuses on social exclusion. She asserts that an understanding of marginalization from the positioning of the individual can help us create a fuller understanding of what constitutes marginalization within educative experiences.

Purpose 1: Student-centred Education Requires Students to be Experts on Themselves

My study looks at educational stratification from Messiou's (2012) conceptualization, "when a child is feeling that he/she is experiencing marginalization, whereas most of the others do not recognise this." Mowat (2015) similarly asserts that by placing the individual at the centre of "what it means to be marginalized," we can find answers to questions that ask, "Marginalised from what?" (p. 456). In asking such questions, this project places the student/participant in the position of expert on themselves. The aim of the study rightly elevating them to claim their authority as they speak their truth; to name their experiences of marginalization; and to counter, deconstruct, and dispute the dominant discourse that causes and maintains systemic discrimination through education models that lead by authoritatively purporting deficiency and deficit-based thinking instead of facilitating asset-based learning opportunities. There is benefit from looking at perspectives and opinions from those who sit within experiences of educational stratification: To better understand hidden or unacknowledged forms of marginalization and to thus aid meaningful exchanges and possible system change from the very people that the system is intended to serve – The student and their perspective is placed at the centre in the true spirit of inclusive education (Mowat, 2015; Shifrer, et al., 2013; United Nations, 1975, 2006, 2017). Their stories can underline the myriad of ways hidden forms of oppression manifest in schools while also serving to raise awareness and consciousness in systems that are largely unconscious.

Purpose 2: A Demonstration of Anti-oppressive Approaches/Student Centred Education

Anti-oppressive research approaches and methodologies applied in my study are deliberately selected to demonstrate student-centred, strengths-based, dialogical approaches as a response to the issue of deficit-based thinking in education. The groundwork used to inform the design of this inquiry is taken from the perspective of emancipatory research. Emancipatory research is aligned with anti-oppressive pedagogies as it challenges the status quo and allows for student voice and creativity in teaching and research strategies, providing for the “...transformation of dominant frameworks and categories of perception, representation, production, implementation, and communication of knowledge,”; as they invite “...reciprocity and collaboration among disciplines, institutions, and social agents of transformation” (Alvarez-Blanco & Torres, 2018, p. 310). Anti-oppressive approaches denote the central thrust and purpose of this inquiry, giving an example of tangible ways to open student-centred dialogue to inform education systems, while also helping students build confidence in genuine modes of expression as they define themselves through strengths-oriented methodologies and methods where viewpoints are neither right nor wrong; they instead contain unopposed perspective. Ayers and Ayers (2011) suggest that students can “... become the subjects and the actors in constructing their own educations, not simply the objects of a regime of discipline and punishment” (p. 106).

Research Questions:

With recent inclusive education initiatives becoming policy over the last decade, there are suggestions that streaming is a thing of the past. Yet, as participant stories will soon reveal and confirm (*Chapter 6*), streaming/stratification practices still happen today. For example, alternative schools are in place for students who do not achieve success at their community

school (for behavioural, psychological, or academic reasons), and there is the overt streaming of students based on academic versus applied pathways, and for those who require learning interventions. I am likewise curious to learn more about how experiences of trauma can impact learning. In making this connection, it is perhaps worthwhile to delve into students' perceptions of whether trauma has compounded stress and learning at school, with deductive questions answered, such as: Does streaming/stratification support or serve to further traumatize students? Does streaming/stratification lead students to feelings or perceptions of marginalization in schools? What are the messages offered to students from educational stratification processes and how do these messages impact the psychology and identity of the student and their self-esteem? Do experiences of educational stratification exacerbate or soothe the emotional state and trauma responses of participants? And most importantly, do experiences of streaming and stratification cause students to feel distress? Do they find it helpful or harmful to their wellbeing?

General and direct questions posed to participants for response and commentary serve as starting points for the conversation to evolve, and to answer the central question, "How have you been *story-o-typed* by the public education system?" To this point, general questions posed are:

- How do students retrospectively perceive their experience in school?
- To what extent were their needs met in school?
- Given student impressions, what suggestions do participants have for improvements in learning environments?
- To what extent did their impressions inform their choice of career path?
- How did their school experience inform their choice of career path or work/life decisions?

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is viewed as an extension of the purpose. My study is a demonstration of democratic, student-centred approaches to harness and invite student perspective to inform inclusive education policies and to have the individual student directly define meaningful learning for them so that personal and collective success (as each student defines it) is supported by K-12 public education. Furman (2021) offers us a way forward as she writes,

I argue for schooling that includes students fully in their learning by making sure that their interests, needs, and personalities shape the curriculum (Freire, 2000; Oylar, 2001). I posit that curriculum ought to be a conversation that includes and is influenced by everyone in the classroom (Phillips, 2004). Where all students need to be in the conversation, some can join easily into the more standard curricula that tend to dominant schools. Others require significant modifications to the conversation if they are to thrive. (pp. 1342-1343)

Scholarly works consulted and cited herein suggest the benefit of inviting diverse student voices to comment on their experiences within learning to inform education systems of their perspectives, learning needs, and preferences (Charlton, 1998; Dejong & Love, 2015; Grover, 2004; Hill, 2006; Messiou, 2012; Messiou, 2019; Stansberry-Brusnahan, et al., 2023; Thompson, 2008). The United Nations (2017) has likewise requested more inquiry, "... both quantitative and qualitative, ... to assess and combat discrimination against [children and] persons with disabilities" (p. 17). Messiou (2019) speaks of the "missing student voices" as she calls for the engagement of all student voices in setting international policies (p. 769). Messiou (2019) speaks

of the importance of student voices in constructing an inclusive school environment that is “child-centred” as she seeks answers to find pedagogies that are,

capable of successfully educating all children, including those who have serious disadvantages and disabilities’ ... There is no explanation however, what this child-centred pedagogy would involve, nor does it highlight the role that students’ voices could play in this process. (p. 769)

In contribution to the field of education, this study is distinct as it harnesses anti-oppressive research strategies to support diverse/educationally stratified students as they story their experience in schools. Razer, et al. (2013) is used as guidance and to demonstrate how true inclusivity can be sought through a process of understanding students from a holistic lens, where teachers (or in this case, researchers):

... come to know each pupil from academic, cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and social perspectives and take account of their full histories. In doing this, they can come to recognize the depth of assets and weakness within each student to create a ‘multi-dimensional learning plan’ (p. 1166)

As such, student participants share their personal stories of truth as they openly discuss their perspectives and their values and innate needs. (Langer, 2011) speaks of how an accession of personal values can serve to shape individualized pedagogy in the *envisionment* of the student’s right to define their preferred aspirations and future, based on their values, beliefs, goals, and dreams. Hence, culturally and linguistically relevant/responsive, strengths-based pedagogies are harnessed as an example of how individualized programming can be informed by inviting and listening to participants tell their stories. Indeed, there is a call to release old notions and pedagogical approaches and to instead *act* with an open mind with intention and *praxis*; to

expand individual and institutional consciousness through dialogical, co-creative processes between teacher/researcher and student/participants (Freire, 2000).

Road Map of the Dissertation

This thesis discussion will proceed with a *Review of Literature* in *Chapter 3* providing a deeper dive into the applicable discourse and to support the conceptual underpinnings and placement of this study within the critical realm. I will take a closer look at how oppression manifests in K-12 education/schools. The discussion emphasises marginalization and oppression within a Canadian and North American context before moving into a synthesis of themes pertaining to educational stratification/marginalization, and thus “story-otyping” in public schooling.

Chapters 4, *Methodologies Chapter*, and Chapter 5, *Methods Chapter*, outline the ideological values and theoretical underpinnings of my study, to support the methodological approach taken. This discussion will involve both critical-transformative and interpretive-constructivist paradigms. I likewise justify my reasoning for the selection of methods as they complement the theoretical frameworks and to support the subjective accounts of lived experience from participants. In Chapter 6, *Storying and Restorying the Data*, I provide thorough accounts of school stories from Mary, Carly, and Ella, in honour of the restoried participant narratives and art pieces obtained from their stories of experience in public education systems. In Chapter 7, *Themes and Patterns Emerging from Story*, I expound on the participant stories by offering an analysis of the themes and patterns that have emerged from collected research data. Chapter 8 closes the dissertation with commentary and a discussion of study limitations, implications, and concluding remarks.

CHAPTER THREE: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

It has been a significant undertaking to read and comprehend the volume of discourse and inquiry on oppression. My approach to reviewing the literature on oppression within education was to explore and explain the recurring themes, theories, and ideologies within the scholarly discourse while highlighting the recurring concepts and perspectives within multiple articles to help flesh out and provide a competent overview of how oppression can impact the marginalized student. Much of the published literature and scholarly discourse found on oppression in education is situated within an American context. Consequently, I have included discourse pertaining to America because it is seen as relevant given Canada's "Americanization." With Canada's close physical proximity to the United States and the American media saturation from widely available television and streaming platforms, there is a transfer of lifestyle and perhaps some level of cultural appropriation relating to American values and viewpoints. While it is acknowledged that education practices are heavily influenced and formed at the federal level in the United States, it is likewise thought that these federal influences trickle down to influence education systems within provincial boundaries in Canada, again given the influence of American thinkers on North American systems of education. Broadly speaking, there is also a global carryover in North America from "European expansionism" across many developed countries given that "global white supremacy" came out of colonialism and "...continues with neoliberalism" (Brady, 2017, p. 119). With that said, in consideration of Canadian scholarly works, topics of oppression in the literature are taken up by themes of neoliberalism and various forms of oppression relating to Indigenous and African Canadian populations. These themes will be extracted and discussed to show how education practices within Canada have a history of

subjugation. Thus, a general overview of how oppression has manifested in Canadian culture and in schools will be evidenced.

Internalized Oppression: The Oppressed Learn to Oppress Themselves

Oppression within education systems exists, even if we do not initially recognize or realize that it exists. Oppression has indeed been normalized in our culture. Scholars (Bailey, et al., 2011, Lugones & Spelman, 1983; Poupart, 2003) refer to this phenomenon as “internalized oppression” as the oppressed ultimately oppress themselves. They explain:

With this system of internalized oppression, which maintains the power of the dominant White society, ... there is no longer a need to overtly enforce or impose the disempowerment or oppression on the oppressed group because the oppressed group will enforce it onto themselves. (p. 481)

As touched upon in the previous two chapters, the proliferation of White or dominant culture has extended over history. Consequently, the oppressed have been conditioned to see themselves through the eyes of mainstream White Eurocentric society. This sort of internalized oppression has served to “normalize” behaviours and beliefs in our culture, resulting in a lack of overt questioning or resistance. This very idea is echoed in Lisa Poupart’s (2003) discourse on internalized oppression within the American Aboriginal culture as she explains, “Like colonized groups throughout the world, American Indian people learned and internalized the discursive practices of the West – the very codes that created, reflected, and reproduced our oppression” (p. 87). As I ponder this information offered by Poupart, I recall a conversation with a colleague who supports Indigenous students in Nova Scotia at a school where we were both employed. We were talking about how a vast majority of Indigenous students attend public school as opposed to

the neighbouring reserve school. He explained that, in his culture, because of the impact of colonialism, they have been taught and conditioned to believe that “white is right.”

Paulo Freire (2000), a Brazilian educational philosopher and well-known leading advocate of critical pedagogy, comments on how the oppressed become numb to their own unfortunate plight and therefore serve to oppress themselves. As he explains,

Self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often do they hear that they are good for nothing ... that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness.

(p. 63)

The literature consulted expands on this idea and suggests that our school systems affirm and emphasize internalized oppression. The idea of internalized oppression has been cited and described within various publications accessed. It is generally agreed that internalized oppression exists in schools given that they have been historically erected and created by white dominator culture (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991; Clark & Flores, 2001; Freire, 2000; Harber, 2004; hooks, 2003; Kohli, 2014). bell hooks (2003), for example, speaks to this concern as she writes:

Certainly as democratic educators we have to work to find ways to teach and share knowledge in a manner that does not reinforce existing structures of domination. ... We may unwittingly collude with structures of domination because of the way learning is organized by institutions. (p. 45)

Chapman (2011) contends that oppressive practices are maintained in education because the dominant group does not see or recognize oppression given their privileged positioning in life. To make change, Chapman (2011) believes we need reflexivity and open dialogue in recognition of perspectives and to uncover beliefs and biases, especially in privileged spheres. In

doing dialogic exercises, we can unearth, come to know, and hence learn, how we serve to oppress others through hearing about experiences of hidden and overt forms of oppression. He explains how those who sit in privilege can open to listening and hearing in understanding of their blind spots as he writes, “We need to reflexively navigate how we (when we are contextually ‘on top’) govern ourselves in such a way as to perceive oppression as something else” (pp. 725-726).

Oppression in Canada: Colonization of Indigenous Peoples

Canada has had a longstanding and unfortunate history of imposing standards and expectations onto students from the narrow vantage of the dominator. Nowhere is this more evident than through a review of the injustices that took place in the creation and enforcement of Residential schooling imposed on young Indigenous populations and their families by the Canadian Government. For more than 100 years, beginning in the 1870s and continuing until the last Residential school closed in 1996, assimilation into White European culture was forced upon the Indigenous population in Canada, stripping them of their identity and heritage, described in the literature as a “colonial genocide.” Andrew Woolford (2013) describes how colonial genocide purposely interrupted Indigenous culture as he writes, “...residential schools ... [were] a crucial node in a network of genocidal events that have made the continuation of Indigenous group life in Canada exceedingly difficult” (p. 69). Undeniably, First Nations have been stripped of their culture, traditions, language, etc., in deliberate and effective efforts to thoroughly assimilate them into a modern Canadian society (Eisenberg, 2018; Razer, et al., 2013; Woolford, 2013). Ella’s Story (*Chapter 6*) provides a firsthand account of how forced assimilation has served to separate her from her Mi’kmaq culture and heritage. With a deep pride in declaring her ancestry, she hesitantly and sheepishly conveys that she is unable to confidently speak about the

traditions and values of her culture. She expresses this by pausing and lowering her gaze as she voices, “Um, we're learning about that”

Today as we attempt to reconcile and repair the damage done to Indigenous peoples, namely through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015), there are those who believe additional damage is being done as we actively work toward reconciliation. Stavrou and Miller (2017) and St. Denis (2007) point out that “Stereotypical cultural revitalization in curricula creates conflict for Indigenous peoples who are trying to reclaim their identities under ongoing colonialism” (Stavrou & Miller, 2017, p. 98). While these kinds of discussions are well intentioned, they can also bring up insecurities and inferiorities within Indigenous peoples given that they have lost much through successful efforts of assimilation and colonialization (again illustrated by Ella’s response above). In many cases it has robbed them of their language or mother tongue and has created a disconnect and an inability to fully centre and place themselves within the values and traditions of their culture (St. Dennis, 2007). Indigenous people have had to suppress and “self-extinguish” their own culture in favour of another to survive and thrive. As Stavro and Miller (2017) put it:

There is a push for cultural revitalization in the classroom, without acknowledging—or only giving passing mention to—the fact that Indigenous peoples were alienated from their cultures ... the curricular commodification of Indigenous cultures makes Indigenous peoples feel inadequate when they cannot perform their culture or language (p. 111).

When one is historically and systematically stripped of their culture, as if something is inherently wrong with it, shame and re-traumatization can take the place of reconciliation and pride of heritage.

White Fragility and the Black Lives Matter Movement

The sentiment of “perceiving oppression as something else” (Chapman, 2011) is a theme that is noted as commonly held by the dominant group, leading to misinterpretation, resistance, and denial. This denial is understood as “white fragility” in scholarly discourse. Robin DiAngelo (2011), a sociologist and the leading expert in this area of inquiry explains:

White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves [in the dominant group]. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. (p. 54)

We have, in fact, in recent years witnessed this very response in our criminal justice system. Despite overt police violence on minority groups in Canada, the recently retired RCMP Police Commissioner, Brenda Lucki, has stated, “I have to admit, I really struggle with the term ‘systemic racism’ ... I think that if systemic racism is meaning that racism is entrenched in our policies and procedures, I would say that we don’t have systemic racism” (LeBlanc and Kirkup, 2020, para. 2). With this recent and obvious example of white fragility, we can see how white society is in many ways ignorant to their privilege and intolerant of racist cultural analysis. There is a failure to recognize that patriarchally erected structures are inherently racist given that they have been informed and enforced by Western Eurocentric values and approaches (Jackson, et al., 2023; McKay, 2021). Parasram (2019) writes of how this fragility, resistance, and intolerance limits and prevents critical cultural analysis while preserving racist practices and perspectives in our world. He explains, “...the racial fragility of white settlers ... pathologically ... [produces and reproduces] ... everyday practices of structural white supremacy” in Canada and beyond, as society is conditioned to accept white norms as being correct, appropriate, and unchangeable (p.

195). Parasram (2019) goes on to comment on how colonialist ideologies are insidiously present, leading to the marginalization and oppression of minority groups as he explains:

...contemporary racism is a covert operation. Encoded in everyday ‘objective’ structures such as the legal and education systems, Canadians are led to believe that universal rules can be drafted by predominantly affluent white men who have never experienced the kind of lives endured by the majority of society living the consequences of these laws. (p. 196)

As a result of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, a revival of revolutionary protests is giving hope to a renewed and reshaped future. Once resistant governmental agencies and organizations are being pushed to change as they are held accountable and asked to justify, evolve, and reform policies that are inherently prejudiced and discriminatory (McKay, 2021). Within the context of school systems, these same structural injustices and biases are likewise present. DiAngelo and Sensoy (2010) explain,

... structural inequities in society not only exist, but are deeply embedded in schooling. [Thus], ... socially-constructed categories of difference (such as gender, race, ability) rather than merit alone, do matter and contribute significantly to students’ experiences, outcomes for success, and future life opportunities. (p. 97)

Howell and Ng-A-Fook (2022) call for an unlearning of the historical Canadian public education system where “... sentiments of entitlement, resistance to change, emotions of anger and denial, and defensive reactions when settler[s] ... are confronted by their intergenerational civic entanglements with a settler colonial system and its anti-Indigenous racisms” (pp. 18-19). They suggest a way forward “... should not be reduced merely to matters of pedagogy,” but instead:

...to unlearn and learn different stories, and to let go of those settler mythologies that have endured for far too long. We must look beyond the Peace Tower, with its proud

bells and waving flag, and past the pomp of the Red Chamber. If we look differently, and listen intently, we may learn to unlearn the logic of settler colonialism. (p. 24)

Education systems have been inconsistent in offering equitable education in response to the varied needs and backgrounds of students. Moreover, the request for equitable systems attempts to fix an inherently broken system which currently looks past establishing equality within spheres of learning. Harber (2004) instead explains, “Schooling is now therefore even more of a competitive assessment and selection mechanism with ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ at all levels” (p. 112). While Kim (2011) speaks of the damage done by placing:

increased emphasis on standardized testing... shift[ing] the emphasis in schools toward drill exercises and rote learning, and away from critical, creative thinking. The high-stakes testing environment has led to the elimination of content areas and activities including electives, the arts, enrichment and gifted programs, foreign language, elementary sciences, and elementary recess (playtime), which leaves little room for imagination. (p. 293)

The concern regarding standardized testing has recently been discussed by Bertrand and Marsh (2021) as they posit, “It is no surprise that many educators would conflate individual students with the labels they’ve been given, considering how test-based accountability policies have shaped our schools” (p. 37). The competitive features of a neoliberalist agenda have indeed taken hold and are now prolific within all aspects of our society; “Becoming an appropriate(d) neoliberal subject who floats free of the social and takes up responsibility for its own survival in a competitive world, where only the fittest survive ...” is likewise an issue of concern in this study (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 258). Given the corporate climate of education and the standardized curriculum that must be adhered to in order to survive and thrive in school, what

happens to the wellbeing and psyche of those students who have differing learning requirements? Is it fair to say these students are oppressed through narrow curriculum practices in the current scheme of schools?

Neoliberalist Reforms. It has been reported in the literature that globalization and neoliberalist reforms have shifted education practices over the past thirty years from that of a humanist paradigm where human potentialities and interests are nurtured, to that of a business philosophy where people are seen as a commodity in a competitive market-based system. In this type of system, students are conditioned toward pursuing success and personal survival in a hyper capitalistic world (Apple, 2016; Bozheva, 2020; Brady, 2017; Carpenter, et al., 2012; Noonan & Coral, 2015). As Noonan and Coral (2015) put it, “If the neoliberal agenda were to be [fully] realised, the primary role of schools would be reduced to preparing students for a life as little but complacent alienated workers, quietly content with the ephemeral pleasures of consumer society” (p. 2). Bhopal and Shain (2014) claim that “... neoliberalism is the new global orthodoxy in the field of education ...” (p. 648). This shift began in Canada during the Conservative Mulroney government, starting in the late 1980s, where “advanced capitalist economies” and “individualism, competition, and privatization” re-envisioned a society and education where “...major policy shifts ... have focused on decentralising provincial responsibilities to municipalities, destabilising organised labour amongst educators, privatisation within and of schools and increases in standardisation of testing and curriculum” (Carpenter, et al., 2012, p. 147). With these neoliberal shifts taking place in Canadian school systems, standardization has served to hold both teachers and students accountable to strict guidelines where surveillance of consistent teaching practices and adherence to policy within learning and teaching ensures that outcomes are met at the expense of critical thinking, creativity, morale, and

originality within pedagogy (Bertrand & Marsh 2021; Carpenter, et al., 2012). Moreover, with government funding cuts to education, and elected school boards losing power or being eliminated altogether in some provinces, corporations and community partners (public-private partnerships) are then required to monetarily infuse schools with required funds to keep extracurricular programming and infrastructure in place (albeit at minimal levels that often do not meet minimal need). These neoliberalist practices have largely jeopardized positive learning experiences for all (Carpenter, et al., 2012). As a result, the broken system ironically blames the student. As Brady (2017) explains, a meritocracy based on subjective appraisals of talent, effort, and achievement exists and "... leads to the pathologizing/blame of the individual, because one dare not argue that the system itself is flawed" (p. 121). Indeed, students who have different learning needs and values can struggle in the neoliberalist climate. Brady (2017) expands on this concern as she discusses how historically marginalized Black and Indigenous students in Canada are seen through a lens that labels them as deficient, instead of recognizing their lived experiences and unique personal and cultural epistemologies. What we instead see is a system that is "colour-blind" and holds an ontology and "epistemology of ignorance" ignoring student's cultural values and learning needs. She writes:

The Black student who is failing is a failure, not because of systems of oppression nor the trauma and material conditions of slavery and colonialism, but because of individual choices and not having the drive to 'pull up those bootstraps.' The Indigenous student who is failing is failing because of a lack of assimilation into dominant white culture, and not because of the very value-systems of sharing and reciprocity of that student's lived experiences, which are incompatible with ideals of excellence and individualism; nor

because of that student's disconnect with educational institutions, which has led to the division of their family, history, and roots. (p. 121)

Injustice and oppression have been long-standing issues in Canadian governmental systems, including education systems (Angel, 2022; Burrage, et al., 2022; Howell & Ng-A-Fook, 2022). And, given that difference is often met with labels of deficit, a climate of stress, fear, competition, and subjectivism has been normalized within the culture of education systems. Brady (2017) posits, "...the system only provides equality for some through the domination of many ... students who are the knowers of their own realities become silenced and disenfranchised from the dominant perspectives presented in Canadian curricula" (pp. 117-118). Brady (2017) goes on to suggest that difference serves as a "dominating tool" in Canadian education as "... problematically, one can only become human or fully human on the terms of the master/colonizer" (p. 122).

Without question, issues of judgement and subjugation are particularly common over racialized groups in our society (Angel, et al., 2022, Brady, 2017; Burrage, et al., 2022; Carpenter, et al., 2012; Howell & Ng-A-Fook, 2022; Milne & Wotherspoon, 2020). In education systems, difference is noted as students are "othered," both passively and overtly, as "internalized racism" can deliver a hidden curriculum where both subjects and actors "... consciously or unconsciously accept a racial hierarchy" (Kohli, 2014, p. 368). Othered or marginalized students are disadvantaged given that their cultural identities are removed or missing from learning environments (hooks, 2003; Howell & Ng-A-Fook, 2022; Kohli, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Moreover, the idea of "interlocking oppression" surfaces here and is important to understanding how diverse students are marginalized (and thus stratified) given that "... the entanglement of identity categories that make up an individual ... such as race, ethnicity,

social class, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, and faith” and can intersect and serve to create multiple and interlocking forms of oppression on the individual (Hulko, 2009, p. 48).

Bakan (2008) picks up on this point and speaks of “alienation and oppression” stemming from “various types of oppression,” as she writes:

Racism is not, of course, the only form of oppression, but coexists with sexism, homophobia, national oppression, and so on.... existing capitalist societies produce and reproduce social relations with a variety of forms of socially, politically, and economically constructed forms of difference, and a variety of forms of racism. (p. 239)

With this point being made, we can recognize that marginalization takes many forms and is nuanced by a variety of personal features and judgements cast upon the individual; which can likewise lead to issues of student marginalization within diverse student populations given that education systems are often not congruent with or understanding of other knowledge systems and cultures that are outside of patriarchal and Eurocentric ontological ideologies.

A Call for Action. School systems function to condition and indoctrinate youth into passivity and obedience in a hegemonic hierarchy that supports and encourages prevailing systems of inequality (Angel, 2022; Calvez & Cummings, 2022; Dawson, 1982; Johnstone & Lee, 2022).

We speak of reconciliation in discussions between Indigenous and colonial or settler populations but, as Angel (2022) reminds us, to bring about real change we need to move from discussions of possibilities to enacting change; it is about funnelling consciousness into right action (p. 166).

Calvez and Cummings (2022) echo the importance of right action given that harmful practices and approaches as they assert that “Colonization is insidious and tenacious by nature, and it will take concerted and intentional effort to disrupt and dismantle it in our government systems, organizations, and professional practices” (p. 569).

Deficit-oriented Education

De Lissovoy (2012) speaks to how deficit-oriented labels are a “violation” of the student, as she writes, “The labeling of students, with regard to ability, behavior, and deviance, has been considered from a critical perspective as a crucial mode of social control” (p. 170). De Lissovoy (2012) recognizes the negative impact of labelling students in schools as she comments, “Labeling, it can be argued, is itself a kind of distorted instruction and knowledge production, in which students are ‘taught’ into the limits of the identities and aspirations that school and society make available to them” (p. 470). And, going back to the pervious commentary on disenfranchised cultures in Canada, De Lissovoy (2012) likewise argues and agrees that the labelling of students in schools can be traced back to the “deficit perspectives” based on “race, class, culture, and gender” (p. 170). Thus, the stratification of students in K-12 education is seen as complex; it can have multiple factors and intersecting identities that come into play. Its roots harken back to colonial times when “... the primacy of a scientific discourse...” was used to “... institutionally stratisfy [sic] students” (p. 170). De Lissovoy (2012) expands on this point as she comments, “student labeling is an organized and institutional moment of a broader discursive assault on marginalized communities, exposing them to a persistent ‘stereotype threat’ (Steele 1997) that seeks to produce the very differences in performance that it ‘diagnoses’” (De Lissovoy, 2012, p. 170).

Ableism in Schools: Disability and Oppression

Ableism is often an unspoken truth in society where an assertion of ability is the message. The ideology of ableism devalues disability and is described as “... a pervasive system of discrimination and exclusion that oppresses people who have mental, emotional and physical disabilities ...” (Rauscher & McClintock, 1996, p. 198). Hehir (2002) agrees as he suggests,

“From an ableist perspective, the devaluation of disability results in societal attitudes that uncritically assert that it is better for a child to walk than roll, speak than sign, read print than read Braille, spell independently than use a spell-check, and hang out with nondisabled kids as opposed to other disabled kids, etc.” (p. 3). Hehir (2002) likewise asserts that because these beliefs are inherent aspects of our society, they also serve to influence perspectives, philosophies, and practices in the education of our children.

Origins of Ableism/Disability Oppression

Wieseler (2020) discusses how ableism is a framing that stems from systems erected by patriarchal influences, as she asserts:

... ableism is deeply intertwined with white supremacy and patriarchy, and ... disabled people’s identities are multifaceted in terms of race, gender, and other social identities; there are no generic disabled people. These factors make it difficult in some cases to distinguish ableism from racism and sexism. In addition, racism and sexism have often functioned by attributing various sorts of lack to members of the groups constructed as subordinate. (p. 715)

Causadias and Umana-Taylor (2018) speak of the pervasiveness of discriminatory school practices and purport that forms of marginalization happen organically through everyday interactions. Causadias and Umana-Taylor (2018) expand on this notion and explain how:

...the forces of context are not limited to historical processes, as marginalization can be defined and redefined in the immediate settings of families, schools, and neighborhoods. For example, schools can create contexts of marginalization with pedagogical approaches that are not well-matched to students’ needs and curricular approaches. (p. 710)

Keefe names disabled students as a minority group (2022) and calls for more attention to be directed at addressing equity issues for students and posits,

within the context of how educational scholars have addressed equity and justice for historically marginalized groups of students, progress is slow in the direction of educational equity; as a result, some minoritized groups, such as disabled students, remain woefully unrepresented. (p. 116).

Students who are in minority groups experience “racialized perceptions of ability.” (Mireles, 2022, p. 19). Mireles (2022) discusses how “black and brown students” often encounter racist beliefs that permeate our systems that are discriminatory and prejudicial based on perceptions of ability. This is known as “racist ableism” as Mireles (2022) expounds:

Black and Brown students *with* and *without* dis/abilities navigate what I refer to as *racist ableism*, which not only positions them as intellectually and academically inferior on the basis of racialized perceptions of ability, capability, and productivity, but also pathologizes them as lazy, deviant, and criminal. (p. 19)

Wieseler (2020) names ableism as “intertwined with white supremacy,” thus linked with historical oppression and thus concurrent with other forms of oppression and marginalization. It involves the action of “othering” students for any number of reasons, or in this case because they diverge from being “able” to learn according to a fixed set of learning norms or expectations (Young, 1990).

Picking up on the comments made in the previous section, numerous scholars have reviewed how labels of disability, within normative learning expectations, serve to marginalize students (Bhopal & Shain, 2014; Chapman, 2012; Goodley, 2013; Lalvani, 2014; Liasidou, 2012; Reid & Knight, 2006; Smith, 2004; Youdell, 2003). To better understand ableism, scholars

accessed for this study come from a critical disability lens, where disability is framed as a “sociopolitical construct” (Lalvani 2014). As mentioned previously, this sociopolitical construct traces back to colonial times where Whiteness was construed as rightness (Ilyes, 2020). Thus, the carryover is that Whiteness is conceived as “...a normative, dominating, unexamined power that underlies the rationality of Eurocentric culture and thought. It serves to push to the margins not only those defined as not-White, but also those defined as not-Able” (Smith, 2004, para. 2).

While Reid and Knight (2006) echo, “...the historical construction of difference makes institutionalized racism, classism, and sexism seem natural in their conflation with disability, defined as oppression based on ableism” (p. 18). Thus, being different or diverse is “othered” and distinguishing difference, from that of strength, masculinity, and whiteness, forms the basis of disability and resulting labels due to the subjective impression of traits, culture, gender, and physical attributes. The term of “intersectional subordination” likewise applies here, originating from feminist discourse (Liasidou, 2012). It acknowledges how disability overlaps and intersects “...with issues of race, socioeconomic background and gender ...” (p. 170). While Reid and Knight (2006) make an interesting point as they comment on how White values have set the tone for definitions of disability. They write:

Whiteness, middle-class or greater affluence, ability, and so forth—has no need of definition. What needs to be marked and narrated is what people think of as outside the norm, that is, the person of color, the disabled body or mind, the person living in poverty. (p. 19)

Historical and sociopolitical constructs inform our perspectives of disability. These same forces have informed the medical model, where pathologizing difference extended from scientific measurements, and where labels of deficiency or disease attached to those deemed

different, weak, or ailing in some way. The medical model is firmly entrenched in schools and “from this ableist perspective, disability is considered a personal condition to correct or cure” (Reid & Knight, 2006, p. 18). Given that “ableist values have colonized our identities” (Gill, 1995) our systems of government, including education systems, have indeed adopted a view of “scientific imperialism,” a term that has evolved from the measurement of things and likewise applies to our impressions of people and the human condition given strict adherence to codifications in relation to a favoured normative baseline (Clarke & Walsh, 2009). Fisher and Goodley (2007) speak of this same idea as they discuss the term “linear narrative” which originated and developed from “modernist interventions such as medicine, and tends to uphold professional boundaries and hierarchies ... reinforce[ing] disempowering interpretations of disability and impairment” (p. 66). While commentary on “the rise of the expert” has justified labels of disability and cognitive impairment over history. Ilyes (2020) discusses how, in 1876 in America, the study of disability took shape under the Association of Medical Officers of American Institutions of Idiotic and Feeble-minded Persons where a patriarchal society of privileged males coined or devised the first

...attempt at hierarchically organizing individuals according to severity of intellectual disability. These labels included categorizations such as ‘unimproved/retrograding idiots, moderately improved/good for institution work, and permanently improved’ (Ferguson, 1994). These hierarchies translate seamlessly to the demands of capitalism, distilling life into a commoditized, quantified product. Capitalistic profit is stitched into the institutional framework. (p. 5)

Thus, through adopting a framework of deficiency when looking at people to make sense of or define them for the purposes of productivity and production, society has moved away from other,

more hopeful and strengths-based approaches of viewing capability and possibility (Clarke & Walsh, 2009). With a focus on capitalistic values, the productivity of people for profit model has meant that those who embody other realities and are deemed defective or unproductive by scientific constructs, and thus penalized by pathologizing labels and cast to the margins. Yet within a critical positioning, there is an opportunity to challenge the dominant discourse. In an ironic sense, criticalists offer the dominators a taste of their own medicine by highlighting the weakness of the current system to equalize the power differential and suggest that the dominant lens is faulty, inadequate, and inherently discriminatory and unfair. As De Lissovoy (2012) acknowledges, “In the case of the labeling of students, the critical perspective focuses on interrogating the dominant classificatory language, exposing its implication in a system of differential privileges, and finding senses of self against the words of the powerful” (p. 477).

Looking at the underperforming student as having some level of learning deficit, Lauchlan and Boyle (2007) discuss how perceiving the student in this way takes the onus off of how “environmental factors” shape and exemplify our collective beliefs and practices. They assert, “...one should consider the child’s teacher, his/her parents and their influence on his/her difficulties, as well as whole school difficulties, specific classroom factors, community issues ...” etc. (p. 40). Their important point picks up on how non-categorical, unspoken beliefs, circumstances, impressions, and how various societal structures and associated principles and beliefs are enacted environmentally to produce characterizations, interpretations, and stereotypes about the individual in subtle and not so subtle ways. Lauchlan and Boyle (2007) comment further on this point by reminding us that it is our natural human tendency to judge. They write, “It is intrinsic to human interaction to stereotype and make generalisations, mainly because it helps us manage huge amounts of complex information ...” (p. 38). To counter this human

tendency, however, a focus on the environmental forces at play can help us to refocus our gaze to instead look outside of the student for a fuller picture and to “...reduce the risk of negative identity impact.” Hellblom-Thibblin and Sandberg (2020) comment further on this “ecological theoretical framework” as they suggest externalizing the person from the educational environment, thus “formulating educational problems ... since it does not involve generalising and thus obscuring the underlying problem of categorisation (p. 12). The idea of perceiving the environment as the problem, rather than the student, is important to my study. Environmental, externalized categorizations and judgements placed on the student are central concerns of this project and will help to frame the intention of uncovering the nuanced and obscured impact overt and silent forms of messaging and categorization have on the identity of children. How do formal and informal customs, practices, opinions, and beliefs shape the personal perspective and future goals of students? In answer to this question, the juxtaposition and influence of formal versus informal categorizations will be sought and discussed as the school system is placed under the microscope.

The Normalization of Deficit Thinking: An Oppressive Practice

As previously touched upon, deficit thinking placed upon students in education systems is viewed as an oppressive practice. To build upon this information, Richard Valencia (1997) argues that “The popular ‘at-risk’ construct, now entrenched in educational circles, views poor and working-class children and their families (typically of color) as being predominantly responsible for school failure, while holding structural inequality blameless” (p. xi). Valencia likewise comments extensively on the “deficit model” that exists in education and he too reports that deficit thinking and assessing our young has roots in history since the early 1600s. He

expands on this idea by arguing that the system takes no responsibility for student failure rates due to a belief that deficits are the result of shortcomings within the student, as he advises:

The deficit thinking model, at its core, is an endogenous theory – positing that the student who fails in school does so because of internal deficits or deficiencies. Such deficits manifest, it is alleged, in limited intellectual abilities, linguistic shortcomings, lack of motivation to learn and immoral behavior. (Valencia, 1997, p. 2)

Deficit thinking is likewise commented on by Paul Gorski (2008). Gorski discusses the oppressive conditions deficit thinking creates for students who present with a different way of learning or a different or “other” way of being in the world. He cautions us against seeing “difference as deficit” as he writes, “The most devastating brand of this sort of deficit thinking emerges when we mistake difference – particularly difference from ourselves – with deficit” (p. 152).

Scholars in support of striving for social justice within classrooms recognize the damage caused by deficit thinking. Gardner and Toope (2011) comment on this by offering, “Deficit discourses which label, pathologize, blame, and over-emphasize youth vulnerabilities limit opportunities for students to engage strengths-based subjectivities in school.” (p. 88). Saleebey (1996) speaks about how North American society is replete with a deficit-focused orientation, as he explains, “...helping professions are saturated with psychosocial approaches based on individual, family, and community pathology, deficits, problems, abnormality, victimization, and disorder ...” (p. 296). While there is a call for a turning away from deficit, to instead acknowledge the strengths and assets within the individual, we are asked to be cognizant of how, ... the system – the bureaucracies and organizations of helping – is often diametrically opposed to a strengths orientation. In both formal and informal venues and structures,

policies, and programs, the preferred language replaces the clients' own lexicon with the vocabulary of problem and disease. (Goldstein, 1990; Saleebey, 1992 (as cited in Saleebey, 1996, p. 297)

Concern around deficit-oriented education systems has been echoed by many across the scholarly discourse (Bertrand, et al., 2018; Bertrand & Marsh, 2021; Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2018; Giroux, 2013), with Humphrey (2014) nicely paraphrasing this line of thought as he offers, “Deficit discourses draw on language that places responsibility for problems on the people they are applied to, creating negative, damaging, and often incontestable, singular identities” (p. 486). Moreover, Humphrey (2014) cautions us against adhering to deficit-oriented practices, as he claims:

... deficit understandings alter perceptions of young people in ways that are damaging to them both personally and educationally. They work to exclude young people from education as well as from participation in broader society, reducing life chances and life expectancy. (pp. 486-487)

Deficits Jeopardize Student Career Futures

Shifrer, et al. (2013) caution against using labels and practices of categorization as these approaches negatively orient students and therefore limit their short-and long-term life and career options. They go on to report the results of their study on “poorer outcomes for youth labelled with learning disabilities” as they describe how the LD label restricts learning and vocational or career prospects, as they write:

... our results are consistent with the hypothesis that the LD label itself defines a status group that limits educational opportunities, possibly through stigma or another marginalizing processes. It is possible that the label shapes how adults perceive the

student's ability and potential (Mehan et al., 1986) and ultimately results in adults being less likely to guide the student toward challenging coursework. It is also possible that the label impacts the students' own beliefs and attitudes. (p. 676)

Oppression in education and schools and discriminatory policies and practices can often go unrecognized, unacknowledged, or at the very least unquestioned. School-based marginalization can be invisible and imperceptible based on our indoctrination into ableism from a young age onward, thus preconditioning people and structures toward favouring of ability. Children and adults are preconditioned and conditioned into becoming and being complicit with unequal power distributions. We are largely a society that accepts coercive, domineering leadership, purporting patriarchal, capitalistic, and structural, values, ideals, and beliefs (Auerbach & Castronovo, 2013; Eisenberg, 2018; Giroux, 1997a; Lu, 2017).

Individual and Institutional Marginalization

Polk, et al. (2020) differentiate between *individual* and *institutional marginalization* by discussing how both framings trace back to root of origins of colonized oppression or marginalization. They clarify that *individual marginalization* is connected to “interactions with others” and is based on racial or cultural discrimination that involves, “... unjust, or unfair interactions between students and their teachers or peers that are attributable to characteristics of the individual student (e.g., demographic background, gender, or sexual orientation) ...” (p. 210). Whereas *institutional marginalization* happens when “...schools, as institutions ... marginalize youth through inequitable policies or the inequitable application of policies (Polk, et al., 2020, p. 210). Both individual and institutional marginalization are “distinct” yet often interconnect, strengthening their impact on people. Polk, et al. (2020), from their perspective indicate marginalization is compounded when individual and structural/institutional

marginalization fuse together within an educational environment. When this occurs, it is understandable how educational systems knowingly and unknowingly marginalize students given the ontological conditioning and influence of colonialism. Mowat (2015) explores this as she discusses how unconscious or unaware systems, unintentionally lead to the marginalization of students. She writes:

... schools can inadvertently act as agents of marginalization: an inappropriate curriculum which fails to take account of individual pupil needs; inflexible and inappropriate systems and structures which fail to recognise the gap between the standards set for pupil behaviour and pupils' capacity to meet such standards. (p. 460)

Educational Stratification Perpetuated by Story-o-typing

With the origins of deficit tied to our conditioning, to identify or pathologize perceived problems in those who fall outside the “norm,” Randall (2014) introduces the notion of “story-o-typing” to define how deficit-oriented stories are applied and offered to people. Stemming from principles of colonialization, and related to “institutional storytelling,” Randall’s (2014) *story-o-typing* is a term that defines external presumptive and assumptive judgemental thinking involving made-up stories about an individual or a group of individuals. It relates to the messaging we all receive from systems that condition and indoctrinate us to automatically think and respond to the world as we do. It relates to the historical and cultural contexts that have shaped systems where “... stories and narratives are social acts that emanate from cultural repertoires that are currently in circulation,” (O’Toole, 2018, p. 278). This is also true of education systems where the perpetuation of a common discourse is taken up or adopted by others, generating a collective understanding where limitations are the focus and inform projections of possibility, or lack thereof, through institutional or organizational “narrative

production” (O’Toole, 2018). This common institutional discourse is hence taken up by the individual, the education community, and society, informing how we view others, ourselves, and the world in general. O’Toole (2018) elaborates on this phenomenon as she uses the term, *institutional storytelling*, by explaining, “... organisations have big stories to tell which set the narrative agenda for the smaller, individual stories that follow along” (p. 178). This very idea traces back to previously cited discourse regarding how patriarchal powers construct society. Labels of deficiency are prescribed to students who fall outside of pre-set standardized norms handed to us by patriarchal, dominator culture (hooks, 2003). This system is organized to categorize and label, and in turn, so are individuals conditioned in this way, in perpetuation and continuation of oppressive cultural ideologies (Butler, 1997; Youdell, 2003).

Booher-Jennings (2008) speak of how marginalization can be unseen or obscure, yet very real, through her discussion of “achievement ideology” that exists in schools. She conveys that hard work is rewarded by merit and success in school, as she writes, “Students in turn, apply the achievement ideology in fashioning their own social relationships, enacting these identities and labelling their peers as ‘deserving’ or ‘undeserving’ ...” (p. 150). She expands on the idea of how the hidden curriculum has been passed on to us based on “... taken-for-granted understandings about the world that schools and teachers, often unknowingly, teach. It is through subtle features of schooling, such as the way that activities, interactions, and social relationships are structured, that the hidden curriculum is delivered” (O’Toole, 2018, p. 150).

Fear Hinders Dialogue

Talking up the call for a renewed and refreshed education system, one that seeks to recognize the unique characteristics of each student in pursuit of assets rather than deficits, we can look to anti-oppressive philosophers and their movements to lead the way. Freire (2000), for

example, comments on the importance of dialogue or the “dialogical man,” opening us up to understanding each other through dialogue; to accept and to see ourselves as equals instead of in recognition of what sets us apart. He speaks to this as he so eloquently writes:

Dialogue further requires an intense faith in humankind, faith in their power to make and remake, to create and re-create, faith in their vocation to be more fully human (which is not the privilege of an elite, but a birthright of all). Faith in people is a *priori* requirement for dialogue; the ‘dialogical man’[sic] believes in others even before he [sic] meets them face to face. (pp. 90-91)

Despite Freire’s assertions so many decades ago on the importance of acceptance, dialogue, and learning from one another, fear seems to prevail within learning environments. Fear in general is known to be broadly detrimental to all participants in any process (teachers and students alike), as it restricts and paralyzes. Fear to address inequality and oppression is also a concern as it prevents open conversations. Fear of saying the wrong thing and feeling humiliated or being penalized for it, and perhaps sometimes rightly so, prevents progress or forward action as it weakens our stride toward making positive change. It is cited by Bulhan (1985) that by challenging the culture of oppression we “plunge ... into profound alienation in all its varieties and anguish” (p. 189). Bulhan’s quote and assertion resonated with me as it supported my own truth in working with and seeking support for a child (discussed in *Chapter 1*) who became the target of commercialized sexual exploitation and human trafficking. Assistance was hard to find, and I too felt marginalized for that brief period. It seemed that by aligning with the marginalized, I too was marginalized. Indeed, my advocacy and attempts to obtain support and assistance was met with resistance on many levels. I reiterate Harber’s (2004) earlier citation as it seems fitting

to assert, “Schooling is now therefore even more of a competitive assessment and selection mechanism with ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ at all levels” (p. 112). Likewise,

pressures are felt and circulated not just by pupils, but by teachers and parents too. For teachers, there is considerable pressure to ‘deliver’ good results, and many fear the consequences of their pupils’ ‘failure’ as much as the pupils themselves. (Jackson, 2010, p. 44)

This very idea is expanded on by Nel Noddings (2012) over her commentary on “ethics of care,” as she suggests the need for greater empathy and care in our systems of education. She comments on the pressures teachers face as she writes:

The academic demands on teachers today are increasingly misdirected. Standardisation requires the same curriculum for all regardless of interests or aptitudes, with achievement measured quantitatively by test scores. Teacher quality, in turn, is judged by student test scores. Almost explicitly, the aim of education is to gain high test scores. What has happened to the idea that education should help people to find out what they are good at, what they would like to do in life, and how they might live their lives as individuals, friends, parents and citizens? (p. 777)

As Noddings (2012) indicates, in a climate of fear, there are many questions that swirl around in the minds of students and teachers: Am I good enough? Am I smart enough? Am I masculine/feminine to the degree society expects me to be? Do I have what it takes to be successful in life? Who am I? Who do I want to be? Can I become what I want in a society that demands I be other than my authentic self? Not to mention the penalization of students who are disobedient where institutional order and compliance is a cornerstone of school behavioural policies. Harber (2004) likewise offers commentary on this element of school control as he

writes, "...the global persistence of the dominant authoritarian model suggests that the original purpose of control and compliance is deeply embedded in schooling and is highly resistant to change as a result" (p. 59). It is the notion of a highly resistant culture and climate that largely inhibits change that underpins this study. It is the very reason why I am looking to gain knowledge concerning the impact of academic oppression on young people in society and schools.

Oppression is Everywhere: Repressed Teachers and Marginalized Subject Areas

Razer et al. (2013) also suggest how oppression and marginalization can spill over in schools and likewise be felt by faculty and staff. They write how public-school teachers are often repressed by tight constraints placed on them, requesting they adhere to strict teaching practices, conditions, and policies. In truth, teachers often and regularly recognize their inability to meet the needs of all students and thus experience a sense of "helplessness" (Razer, et al., 2013, p. 1159). Greene (1995) evolves the conversation as she discusses how marginalization is rife regarding the selection and allocation of course content in schools. She highlights that favouring positivistic knowledge is prevalent while humanistic forms of knowledge, such as *the arts*, is sparse, devalued, and often demoted to elective, thus unnecessary, status in schools.

Anti-Oppressive Pedagogies Defined

The scholarly discourse on anti-oppressive pedagogies is foundational to the ideologies informing anti-oppressive, strengths-based pedagogies and research. I will offer an overview of anti-oppressive or strengths-based pedagogies here with the intention of drawing a parallel to a strengths-based, person-centred research approach, taken in my study and fitting largely into the paradigm of anti-oppressive research. My introduction to anti-oppressive discourse began with Shajahan (2015) as he introduced a definition of anti-oppressive education through referencing

Kumashiro (2000b). Anti-oppressive education is described by Kumashiro (2000b) as "... a classroom pedagogy that addresses the myriad ways in which racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of subjugation and oppression play out in educational institutions and broader society" (p. 244). Kumashiro (2000b) believes that we must fully understand the meaning of oppression so that ways can be found to confront and contradict it (p. 25). Yet, it is suggested in the literature (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001) that while schools in Canada have attempted to address the needs of those classed as at-risk and/or oppressed, more care should be taken to address the requirements of all learners, as they write, "substantial limitations stand in the way of educational progress to ensure that equitable educational opportunities, and a socio-economic framework in which these can be realized, are available to all learners" (p. 332). This issuance goes back to a point made earlier concerning the pressure placed on students to perform to a set "normal" standard. Wotherspoon & Schissel (2001) expound on the competitive school climate that exists in Canadian schools as they offer "... educational environments may damage students who are placed in situations built around expectations and practices dependent on specified conceptions of normality" (pp. 331-332). This citation supports the central question posed: How is the identity of the educationally stratified student, who is tracked into lower track courses, "damaged" by oppressive school messages?

A New Normal: School Systems must Change to that of "Helpful Spaces for All"

It seems permissions need to be granted toward new definitions of normal in our schools and in society to include all students and people; to look for, see, and acknowledge, the unique characteristics and capabilities within each person. Kumashiro (2000b) suggests that anti-oppressive educative practices move away from schools as "harmful spaces" to "helpful spaces" for all students. He suggests a first step toward making spaces helpful should involve helpful

conversations. These conversations should include, focus on, and consider those located within oppressed populations (pp. 27-28). In reference to the question, “how does oppression manifest in schools?”, Kumashiro (2000b) cites there are two forms of oppression that exist. One form is more overt and obvious where “...the Other is treated in harmful ways. Sometimes the harm results from actions by peers or even teachers and staff” while “the second way that researchers have conceptualized oppression is by looking at assumptions about and expectations for the Other – especially those held by educators that influence how the Other is treated” (pp. 26-27). Kumashiro (2000b) makes an important distinction here as he uses the words “actions” and ‘assumptions’ that inform the treatment of the Other. Those who hold privilege and power in society have superficial, long standing, ingrained assumptions about the Other which can cloud their actions, reactions, and treatment of the oppressed and marginalized, further marginalizing the marginalized; it is a vicious cycle. In a way, our deeply imbedded views shape the way we see and interact with *Othered* people and populations. Randall (2014) uses the term *story-o-typing* to describe this phenomenon (discussed in greater depth later). The basic concept of story-o-typing, as Randall discusses, relates to imposing one’s view and values onto another or others (placing your presumed story about who they are onto them) which can impede truthful perspectives as it separates and disallows consciousness raising conversations from occurring. He suggests that *story-o-typing* someone can minimize identity, funnelling them into narrow subjective confines while it likewise serves to hide and conceal the invisible or hidden oppression that is happening, thus preventing it from fully coming to the surface.

Picking up on Kumashiro’s earlier point regarding how assumptions get in the way of seeing or obtaining the full picture, Harkness et al. (2022) similarly chimes in to discuss how personal assumptions and impressions can be pigeonholing, stifling, and inaccurate as they cite,

“Assumptions are often created when we interpret events around us but are influenced more by our prior perceptions and experiences than the evidence that the events present” (p. 139). Instead, anti-oppressive practices ask us to allow people to show us who they are, and in doing so we allow brave conversations to happen for personal and societal betterment, change and understanding; this is the consistent recommendation throughout the research consulted (Angel, 2022; Cowan & Berg, 2023; Freire, 2000; Gill, 1995; Ghosh & Abdi, 2004; Harkness et al., 2022; hooks, 2003; Kumashiro, 2000a; Kumashiro, 2000b;) and it is a suggestion that is applied to my study.

Emancipatory Authority

Kumashiro (2015) suggests we do more of to counter oppression in our schools. He believes we all have a “role to play” in working against oppression as he claims, “Teachers, administrators, counselors, teacher educators, community members, students, and other members of educational communities have different roles to play in challenging oppression and improving education” (para 7). Critical pedagogue and scholar Henry Giroux (1997a) uses the concept of “emancipatory authority” to describe those (in this case teachers) who hold positions of authority and who work toward social empowerment for all. In evolution of this point, Giroux sees teachers as “transformative intellectuals” who have an obligation to teach curriculum but who likewise have the task of expanding consciousness by bringing to light social injustices through dialogical approaches, thus allowing for schools to be truly democratic. Giroux (1997a) speaks to this idea as he explains:

The concept of emancipatory authority suggests that teachers are bearers of critical knowledge, rules, and values through which they consciously articulate and problematize their relationship to each other, to students, to subject matter, and to the wider

community. Such a view of authority challenges the dominant view This means that such educators are not merely concerned with forms of empowerment that promote individual achievement and traditional forms of academic success. Instead, they are also concerned in their teaching with linking empowerment – the ability to think and act critically – to the concept of social transformation. (p. 103)

Critical thought, dialogue, reflection, and meaning making are approaches offered by scholars and educational leaders and are seen as important to transformation via change making conversations to move toward anti-oppressive educative practices. Giroux's (1997a) idea of *emancipatory authority*, or freeing ourselves from the confines of socio-historical thought, invites an opening for critical commentary and appraisal of our society by those who hold power and position in educational environments. Paulo Freire's (2000) discourse, likewise, asks leaders to deliberately work to transform themselves, and thus others, and then society, through dialogue and critical thought. Freire (2000) reminds us of the importance of moving forward in freedom to create a better world as opposed to being held back by "what it has to be" given historical societal constructs and messaging. Freire (2000) expresses this point by saying, "As project, as design for a different, less ugly 'world,' the dream is as necessary to political subjects, transformers of the world and not adapters to it..." (p. 82). Thus, Freire wisely requests that we bravely move beyond what we know to transform it into something better. In doing this, we need to move beyond "common sense" approaches that support the way things are or have been, to instead deliberately challenge and disrupt the status quo in an effort to create a different, better, and a just world for all.

Alternative Models of Teaching and Learning. Kumashiro (2015) speaks to the notion of change by suggesting that “alternative models” of teaching and learning are used or employed, which includes post-structural and critical approaches to bringing forth anti-oppressive ways of being, teaching, and interacting in schools. He suggests that:

...Learning needs to involve challenging the idea that common sense ways of thinking about the world--among students and among educators--are the right ways of thinking about the world. Furthermore, given the recognition that critiquing one's own worldviews can be an uncomfortable process, learning needs to involve opportunities to acknowledge and work through the resistances and emotions involved in raising awareness. [While] ... anti-oppressive teaching involves exploring the insights and changes made possible when such hidden lessons become central to one's teaching. Teaching becomes much more uncertain, quite paradoxical, and centered on oppression in our everyday lives. (para 5-6)

Thus, consciousness raising pedagogies and anti-oppressive pedagogical practices are the recommendation; however, as suggested, we need to be open to and prepared for uncomfortable conversations as we enter into consciousness raising discussions and dialogue. The possibility of resistance to new ways of viewing the world and as hidden lessons and biases are examined, reframed and refuted, is a reality when highlighting oppression and taking action toward equality as a right of learning. It is indeed not a process for the unprepared or the faint of heart. Giroux (1997a) comments on this difficulty as he expounds,

That is, teaching for social transformation means educating students to take risks and to struggle within ongoing relations of power to be able to alter the grounds on which life is lived. Acting as a transformative intellectual means helping students acquire critical knowledge about basic societal structures, such as the economy, the state, the workplace,

and mass culture, so that such institutions can be open to potential transformation. (pp. 103-104)

What concrete steps need to be put in place to bring these changes about? What strategies or approaches can we employ within pedagogy to broach anti-oppressive practice to bring about the changes that Freire (2000), Giroux (1997a), and Kumashiro (2015) reference and discuss? In answering this question, Kumashiro (2001) comments on the uncertainty of mechanism(s) or ways to deliver anti-oppressive pedagogies: What does it mean and how does it look to teach in anti-oppressive ways? He responds to this query as he confronts the notion of a right or clear approach by offering, “There is no panacea, and even my explorations ... need to be treated as tools that, while changing our practices, must themselves be constantly reworked (Kumashiro, 2001, p. 3). That said, he does suggest that we look to the “posts” as possible ways to find solutions to begin anti-oppressive, emancipatory conversations in our classrooms. Kumashiro (2001) references the “posts” as being poststructuralist, postmodernist, and postcolonialist, as he believes they “...offer insightful ways to complicate many approaches to challenging oppression” (p. 3). In employing the “posts” he advises of the benefits and usefulness of these theoretical constructs as he purports that, "... posts writings: unknowability, multiplicity, and looking beyond the known; and resistance, crisis, and resignifying the self” are starting places and considerations for teachers, scholars, and researchers interested in anti-oppressive pursuits (Kumashiro, 2001, p. 3). The posts hold much possibility to uncover and access meaningful expression, allowing for creativity and communication that is uniquely individual. With this advice in mind, post structural modes of communication will be used in this study, celebrating the arts and creative expression. The arts are anti-oppressive and valid as they form a myriad of ways to convey what may be difficult to express through voice or dialogue alone. Indeed, post-

structural approaches stand counter to written or language-based approaches. The posts stand in juxtaposition to systems that literally demand mechanical or rote ways of expression and create an opening for authentic expression.

Strengths-based Pedagogies: Connections to an Appreciative Inquiry

While literature on strengths-based pedagogies is easily found, finding discourse on “strengths-based research” has proven more difficult. In pressing for a way forward, I discovered an article by Alvarez-Blanco and Torres (2018) where they discuss the inherent connection between good teaching and good research. They believe education and research are not mutually exclusive, but instead are of the same genre; both have the common aim of “collaboration and communication.” They write:

...the emancipatory research and transformative approach is indeed a well-rounded communicative practice that can aid and promote democratic citizenship while ending the isolation—or lack of communication—between the speaker, the receiver, the object of study, and the context in which this exchange takes place. From this perspective, to educate does not simply mean to communicate well. Rather, education...becomes a collective process by which a community made up of a group of learners develops its critical and collaborative potential. (p. 312)

Indeed, teaching and research are similarly oriented and offer information to the curious as they question the world to better understand the vantage of another; to understand through collaboration and dialogue; and to empower through knowledge and information. It is with this lens, offered by Alvarez-Blanco and Torres (2018), that I understand strengths-based learning philosophies and how they relate to strengths-based research methods. From this vantage, I undertook a review of the scholarly discourse in search of a paradigm that would attempt to

access and celebrate personal strengths through dialogue and collaboration. In my pursuit of a fitting, strengths-based research paradigm, I was brought to readings on Appreciative Inquiry. Appreciative Inquiry (AI) centres on two obvious but separate variables: *appreciation* and *inquiry* (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). AI is an approach and “... an intervention ... to elicit narratives of success among participants that then create the lens through which the future can be seen and planned” (Kozik et al., 2009, p. 80). It is a “positive lens approach” (McElearney, 2020) “...giv[ing] way to inquiry, imagination, and innovation. Instead of negation, criticism, and spiraling diagnosis, there is discovery, dream, and design” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 8). Over the next section, I will discuss how strengths-based pedagogies and AI are in accord with one another and will be used as underlying philosophies to inform the undertaking of research conversations with participants.

Strengths Based Learning and Appreciative Inquiry: Mutual Recognition of Assets

Strengths-based learning, also known as strengths-based pedagogies or asset-based pedagogies, is a sporadically recognized yet growing field of inquiry. For educators who seek to find ways to engage students who have been marginalized by current schooling practices, it provides an ideology that challenges the myriad of deficit discourses and practices described previously over the literature review. Recognizing the damage done to students when they are oppressed through *stereotyping or story-o-typing*, or pathologizing labels, strengths-based pedagogies argue for the acknowledgement and engagement of “... student strengths and challenge deficit perspectives” (Gardner & Toope, 2011, p. 89). As Lopez and Louis (2009) describe it, “Strengths based educational models represent a return to basic educational principles that emphasize the positive aspects of student effort and achievement, as well as human strengths” (p. 1). Identifying positive human attributes is a key feature of Appreciative

Inquiry (AI). With the core of AI being appreciation, this strengths-based paradigm supports the discovery of "...the best in people or the world around us; affirming past and present strengths, successes, and potentials ..." (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005, p. 7). Educational philosophers (Dewey, 1938; Freire, 2000; Greene, 1995; hooks 2003; Rogers, 1961) have endorsed seeking individual strengths to harness positive educative experiences, which is also in keeping with AI. Likewise, AI aligns with strengths-based approaches as both deliberately pursue democratic pedagogies that support and unearth the best attributes, traits, and propensities within the person or student and praise positive features in them to assist the individual in obtaining an empowered identity and future. While Saleebey (1996) describes the importance of establishing relationships between equals in creating a strengths-friendly environment, acknowledging how learning takes place in many ways, across many situations in life. He explains:

People learn from the world around them, through formal education or through the distilling of their day-to-day experience. Clients can often surprise practitioners (and themselves) with the talents they have (or once had but let fall into disuse or out of memory). Such talents, whether juggling, cooking, baking bread, or tending to the needs of the ill, may become tools for helping to build a better life. (p.299)

Strengths-oriented educators serve to broaden the definition of school success bridging the gap between subjects taught in school to show the importance of obtaining capability around transferable life/work skills. They include other characteristics of personhood that support life success, not just academic success. These strengths-oriented characteristics and qualities are "...important educational indicators, such as hope, engagement, well-being, and other predictors of attendance, achievement, credits earned, and retention" (Lopez & Louis, 2009, pp. 2-3). AI is similar as it focuses on what's working, possibility, and the innate assets and strengths within the

person rather than focusing on problems and concerns. Indeed, AI is inherently optimistic and positive as it “...focuses on exploring the possibilities instead of the problems – identifying strengths and positive aspects – where the assets may function as reformulation of the current situation in order to find new ways for positive change, which support human flourishing ...” (Bergmark & Kostenius, 2018, p. 624).

Teachers embracing a strengths-based orientation, in practice, also utilize a strengths-based approach on themselves (Anderson, 2004). Strengths-based learning is philosophically and holistically oriented, asking the teacher to acknowledge and recognize their strengths as a starting place. The teacher, by embodying this philosophy first-hand, can more readily take on a role of *emancipatory authority* (Giroux 1997a), by seeing their strengths and skills and raising consciousness within themselves. Thus, through knowing and applying their own strengths to themselves and their work and life they can better assist and serve students in appreciation and discovery of their individual strengths, which can then have broader implications for change in society as more teachers and people adopt this approach (Anderson, 2004; Lopez & Louis, 2009). Moreover, teachers who employ a strengths-based practice nurture and strive for democratic practices where they release their tight grasp on authoritative relations and commit to engaging with students as equals. Gardner and Toope (2011) speak to this notion as they cite, “A significant part of creating more democratic relations with students involves respecting rather than making judgments about them. Active engagement and democratic dialogue are also emphasized ...” (p. 96). Looking to AI, we can see similar themes of collaboration and consciousness-raising around positive attributes in people and education systems given that, AI offers a means of engaging colleagues and students in educational development without the baggage of these deficit-driven, performance management approaches ...

Students are not invited or encouraged to see themselves as complaining customers, nor are academic staff positioned as defensive traditionalists, instead a dialogue is started about what works. (Kadi-Hanifi, et al., 2014, p. 585)

The collaborative approach of AI, which focuses on mutual recognition of assets and strengths, embraces the whole person, and sees beyond traditionally oriented definitions of success. AI holds an ideal of possibility that complements and supports the anti-oppressive intention and commitment of my research project. With the guidance of AI, my project cultivates and amplifies affirming perspectives in acknowledgement of assets and strengths. It welcomes optimistic potentials for all involved, igniting personal renewal and revitalization and “awakening the appreciative eye” (Cooperrider & Fry, 2020).

Looking Beyond in Recognition of Deeper Meaning and Metaphor

Picking up again on Kumashiro’s (2001) invitation to embrace the “posts,” strengths-based teachers likewise make use of “creative and flexible pedagogies” as they maneuver “...tensions and politics within the education system from both deficit and strengths-based perspectives” (Gardiner & Toope, 2011, p. 97). Gardner and Toope (2011) explain this further as they write, “Through creativity and flexibility, educators engage SB [i.e., strengths-based] social justice practice by working to create options and opportunities for students experiencing educational barriers so that schooling is more accessible and equitable for them” (p. 97). An AI framework mirrors this value as it searches for deeper meaning and metaphor in the regular or ordinary events in life. Cooperrider and Fry (2020) speak to this point as they ask us to deepen impressions, and perhaps take an artist’s gaze at life. They write:

Thank goodness, then, for the example of our artists, the ways they see, and the many layers of meaning that they help each one of us see and appreciate. Consider how Vincent

van Gogh helps us see the extraordinary in an ordinary tea cup, or in a simple and unpretentious vase of flowers. (p. 268)

Indeed, meaning making and metaphor can lie hidden and dormant behind ordinary life, especially where issues of suffering and marginalization have been normalized in our culture. Yet AI encourages us to look beyond and to transcend the polarity of negative and positive and instead "...to inquire into what is life. The task of AI is the penetrating search for what gives life, what fuels developmental potential, and what has deep meaning ..." (Cooperrider & Fry, 2020, p. 269). While Greene (1995) illustrates this same point as she so poignantly writes, "Art offers life; it offers hope; it offers the prospect of discovery; it offers light. Resisting, we may make the teaching of the aesthetic our pedagogic creed" (p. 133).

Gardner and Toope (2011) end their discussion of strengths-based pedagogies, by citing the need for more inquiry on strengths-based practices, as they believe "...educational literatures on democracy, youth voice/engagement, critical, post-modern and socio-cultural approaches would glean valuable insights to further the study of SB approaches from a social justice perspective" (p. 99). While Cooperrider and Fry (2020) remind us that "... there is always the radically increased potential to summon our better humanity" (p. 269).

Culturally Relevant Themes and Anti-Oppressive Research Counter Epistemic Oppression

Culturally relevant pedagogies, also referred to as culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogies, are strengths-based pedagogies and have been employed throughout the planning and undertaking of my project; using a culturally responsive approach I have attempted to acknowledge the unique aspects of participants, being conscious and mindful of individual values and worldview to build confidence and rapport (Fox, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995). My primary concern in conducting this research involved working with participants in a way that

facilitated trust, honoured their way of learning and being, while likewise supported their way of communicating and expressing themselves. Fox (2013) references taking a democratic, person-centered approach to research as she writes, “For ... young people, and, indeed, any group experiencing exclusion from society, formal research practices look like any other formal institutional context” and resistance is sure to follow (2013, p. 994). Of specific note, however, as I have undertaken this work, is the potential for unintentional yet real harm to participants as their stories are shared with me and thus a larger audience for individual and communal learning purposes and interpretation. Even with the proper safeguards that are customarily put in place through informed consent and research agreements, I am aware of concerns discussed by Berenstain (2016) and Dunne and Kotsonis (2023) who name “epistemic exploitation” as an issue that can arise when conducting research with marginalized populations. Lugones and Spelman (1983), and Young (1990) have similarly discussed a similar concern as they use the term “epistemic imperialism,” to name the potential of further marginalizing research participants as they participate in research processes. Within the framing of epistemic exploitation, it is proposed that research participants share their knowledge, their stories, and “labour” which is taken to provide merit to the work of researchers or those in alignment with dominant hierarchies. Therefore, those who hold privilege and value laden beliefs about society and truth can lean toward framing the results of an inquiry in ways that uphold dominant beliefs and discourse. Moreover, within this line of thought, concern has been expressed around inviting those experiencing marginalization to share their stories under the pretense of anticipated change from what is shared. And if/when participant assumptions do not materialize as expected into meaningful change, disappointment can ultimately take hold and leave long lasting harms to participants, or those most vulnerable, who come forward in good faith and with a desire to make

change and help the greater good. And when this happens, distrust and resistance within participants and marginalized peoples continues. This can be compounded when systems of privilege (educational institutions in this instance) dispute, misunderstand, and dismiss personal epistemologies and epistemological claims. Berenstain (2016) makes this assertion as she writes:

When the privilege demand and then reject the conceptual and epistemic goods that the marginalized produce, they erase practices of epistemic resistance. This functions to confirm the myth that there are no valuable or useful epistemic resources besides those that fit into the dominant theoretical frameworks. The marginalized can then be made to appear responsible for their own epistemic oppression. Epistemic exploitation upholds the dominant conceptual schemas by maintaining the illusion that there are simply no viable alternatives. (p. 587)

It has been noted that another way epistemic exploitation can manifest is through “...the dominantly situated ... [those in privileged positions/researchers who] do not invite them [marginalized voices] to update, reframe, or contribute to the discourses they control” (Berenstain, 2016, p. 587). Using this conceptualization of possible epistemic exploitation, I am astutely aware that conducting research with marginalized or vulnerable people has risk of epistemic oppression and exploitation. To do no harm and to craft and construct research that supports and protects participants as best as possible has been my aim, yet I also realize that knowledge is never neutral. Wieseler (2020) makes this point as she writes, “Claims to be neutral do not solve the problem at hand; worse they obscure the power relations at play and create obstacles to addressing the problem” (pp. 718-719). Thus, remediating the potential for additional harm and oppression, or “ontic burnout,” a term coined by Dunne and Kotsonis (2023). Ontic burnout is thought of as “...a specific subset of physical, emotional and mental

exhaustion (harms) triggered when privileged persons ... repeatedly or otherwise compel marginalised or oppressed knowers to educate them [and others] about the nature of their oppression” (p. 351). Moreover, Dunne and Kotsonis (2023) caution the research community as they bring awareness to the idea that an individual can be further victimized over critical research given their agreement to participate and identify as a member of a disenfranchised group. As I consider these important points offered by Berenstain (2016) and Dunne and Kotsonis’ (2023) I have indeed grappled with the tensions and possible harms involved in constructing research. It has been my attempt to honour and support participants while guarding against creating further harm. That said, scholars who have cautioned us with their writings on epistemic oppression do not offer alternative approaches and considerations or resolutions to their stated concerns. Dunne and Kotsonis (2023) humbly disclose their uncertainty concerning how to resolve such issues and the possible perpetuation of oppression on research participants as they disclose, “...what to do instead or how to fix the harm is beyond the scope of the paper” (p. 353). Yet other scholars have weighed in on this concern, with Apple (2016) naming several considerations for the critical scholar to consider. He suggests we act in recognition and in ways to prevent “exploitation and domination;” to use frameworks in research that provide for the interrogation of hegemonic societal practices that are “counter-hegemonic;” to expand research with “thick descriptions” and “critical analysis” and to make use of innovative research approaches. He likewise compels researchers to walk their talk and to “act” in congruence and alignment with the work they are undertaking in their research. Thus, to act and follow through as “... a deeply committed mentor, as someone who demonstrates through her or his life what it means to be *both* an excellent researcher and a committed member of a society that is scarred by persistent inequalities” (pp. 511-513). With these suggestions top mind, I have attempted to

infuse Apple's (2016) wisdom and Kumashiro's (2001) assertion of using the "posts" into my research as I have pursued this critical research project. In doing this, I have deferred to strategies noted to be anti-oppressive given that they invite rich, authentic, creative expression, coupled with interpretation strategies that are emergent and person-centred, to honour and invite the unique attributes of each person as they share their stories of struggle. In accounting for and negating harms as much as possible, I deliberately sought adults who could knowingly consent to potential harms, while I took counsel from the scholars that speak to anti-oppressive practices and approaches. I was particularly moved by Denzin's (2019) poem in honour of scholars, Mills, Freire, Boal, who have been inspirational to him over his pursuit of critical scholarship. As I read his poem I was particularly drawn to his description of harnessing "...dialogue, turning persons into co-performers, turning participants into actors, taking the side of the oppressed, inspiring utopian dreams, creating moral communities ..." (p. 530) to steady myself through the praxis of conducting humanely orchestrated, anti-oppressive research. My guiding force focused was on honesty and transparency throughout the totality of the project. In the end I hope this project is a celebration of the participant, inviting their personal truth, in equal partnership, as a co-contributor to the knowledge and information obtained. Moreover, participant narratives can be taken as stand-alone counter narratives to that of the grand narrative that makes up school culture.

Considering the privileged leaning of Western Eurocentric values and research practices, care has been taken to plan and conduct research that does not perpetuate intimidating, exclusionary practices. Other scholars have cited this concern as they recognize and purport the need for creative, experiential, and anti-oppressive research approaches given that most research is tied to Western values, often unknowingly enabling and maintaining hegemonic research

processes on already weary and distrusting marginalized populations (Capous-Desyllas & Morgaine, 2018; Fox, 2013; Greene 1995; hooks, 2003; Leavy, 2020). In keeping with anti-oppressive research, cues can be taken from culturally responsive practices. Ladson-Billings' (1995) seminal work on culturally relevant pedagogies claims that students need to feel comfortable and accepted to embrace learning. Indeed, students need to feel as though they belong and that school is a safe place where they can "be themselves" as she writes, "Culturally relevant teachers utilize students' culture as a vehicle for learning, where students can express themselves in areas where they hold knowledge and in ways [arts, poetry, writing speaking etc.] in which they are most at ease" (p. 161). While renowned scholar Geneva Gay (2015) explains that it is only appropriate to question and resist traditional models of education given that Western or Eurocentric ideals and approaches are not suited to diverse student values and backgrounds. Moreover, Western, or patriarchal education systems, run counter to the creation of democratic classroom spaces. She expands upon this point as she writes:

Culturally responsive teaching challenges many conventional teaching conceptions and practices, and assumptions about ethnically, racially, socially, and culturally diverse peoples. Among these challenged beliefs is the claim that the heritages of people of European ancestry and middle class lifestyles are always normative and universal. ...The powerful and privileged groups in these countries set the rules and regulations for how everyone else is to learn and behave based on their own cultural standards ... Rather, ethnic, racial, cultural, social, and linguistic pluralism is considered as a natural attribute of humankind, as a fundamental feature of the democratic ethos (whether as an ethic of community living or a structure of government), and as a necessary component of quality education in both national and international contexts. (p, 125)

With the tenets of Ladson-Billings (1995) and Gay (2015) complementing the framing my project, participants were invited to lay claim to their natural and innate way of being as they expressed their views in ways they deemed appropriate for them, in an environment allowing for the liberation of the psyche in support of creative expression and expansion. Moreover, care was taken to prevent the enactment of traditional values, as "... experiential teaching [and research] methods are ... alternatives to hegemonic and often exclusionary approaches to learning and contributing ... [allowing for the] adopting and implementing [of] more liberatory educational frameworks" (Lorenzetti & Walsh, 2014, p. 53).

CHAPTER FOUR: METHODOLOGIES

In this chapter, I discuss the general methodological ideologies and principles that are used to inform the methods applied to my project. I offer commentary on two separate yet complementary methodological approaches (arts-informed and narrative methodologies) to describe my research approaches as they underscore the aim of this project; to invite authentic expression of student voice. I have likewise provided methodological reasoning for the research question or problem posed, which centres on *story-o-typing*. I also discuss and make clear the methodological assumptions underpinning my use of narrative research and narrative counselling strategies used to facilitate the inquiry process and the description of participant collages and approaches taken to restory the narratives offered by participants.

Theoretical Frameworks/Perspectives Influencing and Informing Research

Admittedly, I have grappled with the theoretical orientation of my study as my worldview encapsulates several philosophies that hold tension and agreement with one another. The establishment and acknowledgement of blurred lines between paradigms or worldviews is voiced and confirmed by Primecz (2020) in her discussion specifically of the critical paradigm, as she claims,

Marxists, post-Marxists, post-modernists, feminists, ecological thinkers, irreductionists, critical-realists, postcolonial researchers, and many others ... might have major criticism of the existing social order. This is why it is logical that different or even contradictory forms of epistemology, ontology, and methodology might be present in one paradigm: the critical paradigm. (p. 130)

Using Primecz (2020) and her positioning above, the critical paradigm seems open to various epistemologies, ontologies, and methodologies. With this assurance, I was encouraged to press

forward in trust that I would find my way toward an appropriate research construction. As I pressed on, it was my readings of Merriam (2009) who suggested, “One of the clearest ways to identify your theoretical framework is to attend to the literature you are reading that is related to your topic of interest” (p. 67). With this advice in mind, I reflected on the original conception of my research, formulated through eager readings of critical theory and emancipatory discourse. While it has been a challenge to find a paradigm that singularly informs the intention and objectives of my project, the aim of this project is to indeed to “criticize ... the existing social order” (Primecz, 2020), and therefore informs the underpinnings of my work.

With the overarching intention of my project allowing for consciousness raising within participants and education systems, my study is then anchored by a critical research paradigm, based on the problem posed (story-o-typing) thus leading to the educational stratification of students. My study, however, also serves to harness student or participant voice and perspective, requiring a subjective interpretation of social experience. This aspect of my project positions this work within an interpretivist-constructivist paradigm. Thus, I believe I have reasonably worked through these nuances and tensions cited to arrive at a place where this study is firmly rooted. While I know without a doubt my study is solitarily a qualitative study, I believe there are two theoretical paradigms that have surfaced as appropriate which I will discuss in greater depth now. These two paradigms have provided me with guidance over the orientation and construction of my study.

The overarching paradigm that anchors my research sits within the critical realm, also known as a critical-realist or transformative paradigm (in view and recognition of how external structures, such as education systems, have been constructed and maintained by a patriarchal culture of domination). Creswell (2013) notes that “Transformative research provides a voice for

... participants, raising their consciousness or advancing an agenda for change to improve... lives. It becomes a united voice for reform and change” (p. 38). The other paradigm, outlining the methodological approaches taken, is anchored within interpretivist-constructivist ideologies (in recognition that human meaning making involves a very personal interpretation of the external world and its experiences). Meanings sought through use of this paradigm are “...varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas ... Often these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically” (Creswell, 2013, p. 37). Thus, my study sits within the critical school of thought or milieu, where reality or perspective of the external world is ontologically tied to dominant cultural forces that have been reified through socio historical factors and influences. Indeed, the critical paradigm has been central to my worldview and personal experiences and has directly served in the framing and formulation of my research problem or question. The concern under investigation arising from student *story-o-typing* experienced by diverse students who ultimately become educationally disadvantaged students due to the pedagogical values and approaches taken in public education systems.

While a critical-transformative paradigm will be used to set the tone of the study, an interpretivist-constructivist model has also been largely applied over my study to inform the methodological approaches (arts-informed and narrative methods) to collect, discern, and display participant stories and lived realities. Indeed, it is through a convergence of critical and constructivist paradigms in which understandings, tensions, and connections are made in reference to external social constructions or reified “truths” made through an exploration of subjective human impressions related to psychological perceptions and interpretations of external experience. It is an intermingling of external and internal worlds, culminating together to form

and support the methodological values and approaches underpinning the research design; these paradigms deliberately and intentionally intersect as I have facilitated, analysed, and represented the information acquired. Put succinctly, my study uses a critical ontological lens and an interpretive-constructivist epistemology to expose and reveal participant experiences within the public education system.

Interpretivist-constructivist Influences

Through my initial readings in the area of interpretivist-constructivism, I understand that this approach is shaped by various schools of thought with underpinnings tied to the field of hermeneutics. While the meaning of the word hermeneutics has evolved over history from Greek origins to now, the etymology of hermeneutics translates into the art of interpreting language or texts. Gadamer (2006) explains, “Theologically, hermeneutics signifies the art of rightly interpreting the Holy Scriptures, which in itself is an ancient art” (pp. 30-31). And as the definition has expanded over time, Gadamer’s post-positivist philosophies centre on creating an openness “...to understand the content of what is said, and only secondarily to isolate and understand another’s meaning as such.” That is, the moment of “truth” will emerge in the process of dialogue” (Chen, 1987, p. 189). Gadamer’s (2006) views on hermeneutics likewise uses theories relating to how we interact with the aesthetic to help shape and describe an organic process of truth and discovery. Gadamer (2006) believed the hermeneutical lens, ... grants individuals legitimacy to register their own receptive utilization of a work of art. The *truths* of artwork do not belong solely to the creator (artist) or critic (institutionalized criteria of aesthetic judgement), but also belong to the individual reader’s own reflection. (Chen, 1987, p. 189)

Thus, human understanding involves mutual interaction with oneself (psychologically and intellectually) within the external environment (socially): an understanding of the self, in the context of personal and psychological interpretations within socially constructed terms that are adopted and accepted by the collective. Like the creation of art, the processing of human experience is intimate and malleable, and unique to each person. To explain this further, Bourgeois (2007) states that Gadamer,

Criticize[s] a methodological approach to interpretation that presupposes the need for distance or neutrality in regard to what is being interpreted. Instead, using the model of aesthetics, one needs to allow oneself to be affected and potentially transformed by one's encounter with the truth of an artwork or text. Only in this way can true interpretation take place. (p. 3)

Underpinning this perspective, Carnevale (2013) states that Charles Taylor likewise understood that people construct understandings of themselves through interactions with others or "intersubjectively," as he explains,

Intersubjective meanings form the basis of our self-understandings as well as our shared values and understandings, while they are also constitutive of a common world among some groups, such as communities. Ultimately, all such meanings and understandings are historically rooted – continually coloured by how things have come to be regarded in a particular manner. (p. 87)

Going deeper into the scholarly discourse, Creswell (2013) advises that constructivism or social constructivism is often combined or interchangeable with interpretivism and originally stems from Karl Mannheim's ideology that one's social positioning, their class, and family background directly informs their perspective or worldview. Creswell (2013) likewise advises

that sociologists Berger and Luckman (1967) evolved the ideology of social constructivism beyond the original beginnings of this school of thought. Parton (2008), in a commentary on Berger and Luckman's work, explains how society, "... is a symbolic construct composed of ideas, meanings and language, which is all the time changing through human action while also imposing both constraints and possibilities on human actors" (p. 823). Parton (2008) goes on to explain how Berger and Luckman (1967) believed it was through human interaction and interpretation of the world which leads to the framing of "reality," which is a construct. As people take on and make sense of the world, there is a natural, internal, and organic organization of external information that is understood through compartmentalized thought or "phenomena" leading to a sense of "objective reality." Human interaction with the world is seen as a reciprocal relationship, an interactive process that is fluid and "... thereby constructing and changing the world and ourselves ... [yet fixed] in the context of the institutions and frameworks of meaning handed down by previous generations" (p. 823). The notion that human-meaning is constructed from lived experience and in interaction with the external world resonates with me. Merriam (2009) elaborates on this framing as she posits, "Interpretive research ... assumes that reality is socially constructed, that there is no single observable reality. Rather, there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event" (p. 8). While Crotty (1998) builds on interpretivism as he clarifies the closely tied meaning of a constructivist paradigm and asserts, "What constructionism claims is that meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (p. 42). Thus, there can be a myriad of ways to interpret personal interaction with the world. Schwandt (1998) expands on this definition and describes constructivism as a kind of social research with a,

... goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it.... That is, particular actors, in particular places, at particular times, fashion meaning out of events and phenomenon, through prolonged, complex processes of social interaction involving history, language, and action. (pp. 221-222)

In keeping with Schwandt's definition above, Merriam (2009) confirms that interpretivism and constructivism are closely oriented and reliant upon one another as they are "interchangeable." She affirms, "Researchers do not 'find' knowledge, they construct it" (p. 9). To be sure, research is a constructive and interpretive interchange between participant and researcher, each with their own interpretation of experience as they process together in the moment of research, and then again later as they interact, take in, and take up meaning through absorption, interpretation, and perception of meaning from their interaction together (in the moment, and at multiple points thereafter – it is an ongoing process).

Critical Transformative Influences

Drawing on the interpretive-constructivist line of thought, Morrow (2007) discusses how, ...critical-ideological paradigms assume, like the interpretivist-constructivist perspective, that multiple realities exist; but they also agree on a 'real' reality related to power and oppression. Thus, they are said to hold a critical realist ontology, and their epistemology, like interpretivism-constructivism, is transactional (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994). They value subjectivity—their own and their participants'—and are committed to social justice and ending oppression; thus their axiology can be said to be value laden. (pp. 213-214)

Thus, critical paradigms have an inherent bias and speak to the world as it has been historically constructed and work toward empowering participants "...to transform the status quo and emancipate themselves from ongoing oppression" (Ponterotto, 2005, p. 131).

The critical paradigm applied to my project invites reflective dialogue, and it is seen as an effective qualitative tool for debunking the myths of equality. It can be harnessed to deconstruct and dispute the hidden messages that lie within society that serve to suppress an egalitarian standard; the idea that we are all unique and deserve to be treated equitably and humanely. As such, the methodologies used and employed in this project are aligned with critical paradigms and work alongside interpretive-constructivist tools. From the research consulted and the recommendations taken from scholarly discourse, an understanding of human conditions will be sought through arts-informed and dialogical/narrative approaches. Accessing methods that provide for multiple modes of visual and verbal conversations are used to transverse the invisible yet real boundaries that so often prevent people in society from requesting and reinventing a better world.

Qualitative Research Paradigm

With origins in the fields of anthropology and sociology, qualitative inquiry was born when people were asked questions to seek information and to understand their lived experiences and worlds (Merriam, 2009). Qualitative research is viewed as "... the most useful approach to understanding the meanings people make of their experiences" (Morrow, 2007, p. 211). Beneficial "when one needs to present a detailed and in-depth view of a phenomenon. ... qualitative approaches are able to delve into complex processes and illustrate the multifaceted nature of human phenomena" (Morrow, 2007, p. 211). With this very basic definition, Denzin and Lincoln (2018) take a deep dive to explore the kinds of qualitative research that have been developed over time, stating how it has shifted and evolved over the years. They speak of how it has changed and grown, informed by the values driving that particular moment in history. Hence, we can compare qualitative research to the fluidity of human development, advancing and

expanding over time, becoming more instinctive, aware, and responsive to the nuances and the problems of life with its unfoldment. Spanning nine historical moments, Denzin and Lincoln (2018), give an account of its progression, beginning with the traditional era of qualitative inquiry from the 900's to 1950 and moving through nine distinct phases, as they cite:

...the modernist or golden age (1950–1970), blurred genres (1970–1980), the paradigm wars (1980–1985), the crisis of representation (1986–1990), the postmodern (1990–1995), postexperimental inquiry (1995–2000), the methodologically contested present (2000–2004), paradigm proliferation (2005–2010), and the fractured, posthumanist present that battles managerialism in the audit-driven academy (2010–2015), an uncertain, utopian future, where critical inquiry finds its voice in the public arena (2016–) ... (p. 42).

Recognizing the historical moments and tensions mentioned above, divergent schools of thought have given way to a multitude of complexities making up the large body of qualitative theories and approaches at our disposal today. Denzin and Lincoln (2018) speak of a “complex historical field” as they write “Qualitative research means different things in each of these moments” (p. 43).

Reflecting over the benefits and variation of approaches within the qualitative paradigm, I have come to this work in the context of this moment. Indeed, I have undertaken this scholarly pursuit within the rise of “an uncertain, utopian future, where critical theory finds its voice within the public area” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 42). And, while there are many approaches I could have put into practice as I have designed and facilitated this specific qualitative inquiry, I acknowledge my allegiance to critical theory/pedagogy as I reached for a way to contribute to the discourse “...to show how the practices of qualitative research can help change the world in

positive ways” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 12). Thus, as I orient my study within a critical research paradigm, I of course look to the existing critical scholarly discourse to assist me in my orientation and process. In doing this, I was drawn to the literature that suggests creativity and possibilities, taking my cue from those who support pushing boundaries, embracing opportunities to harness imagination and to spark inspiration in and through my conversations with people to uncover knowledge not yet known. Dimitriadis (2016) has commented on the vast possibilities of a qualitative research paradigm, as he suggests we may want to look at “producing knowledge differently” in what he refers to as “postqualitative” research. He discusses this intriguing point as he writes:

We have a qualitative research that can serve political and pedagogical ends. We have a qualitative research that pushes against the boundaries of traditional representation in research in looking to drama, poetry, visual art, and other forms of aesthetic practice. We have a qualitative inquiry that moves across the concerns of various disciplines, including those of applied fields such as nursing as well as more traditional social scientific fields such as psychology. The field has benefited from the various “posts” and “turns” that have influenced social thought more broadly, and qualitative inquiry has certainly stretched its parameters in attendant ways. (p. 141)

Reading these words from Dimitriadis I was both challenged and comforted to hear that there is room to stretch within the emergent boundaries of a creatively oriented, critical qualitative project. I made use of these cited philosophies as I have assembled and made this empirical contribution. Qualitative methodological approaches are a natural fit and informed the thrust and intention of my study; the overarching theme and purpose placing it within a critical-transformative paradigm offering participants the opportunity to discuss and confront the

oppression received through their experience of being *story-o-typed* (Randall, 2014). The shared orientation and theoretical perspectives of critical-transformative philosophies married with interpretivist-constructivist methodologies form an amalgamation of relevant concepts and commitments seen as justifiable as Morrow (2007) affirms,

...it would be simplistic to assume that each research project falls neatly under a single paradigm. It may be useful to see the qualitative researcher as a bricoleur...who crosses paradigms knowledgeably, carefully, and in response to the nature of the research question and emerging data. (p. 214)

While Leavy (2020) echoes this idea by describing qualitative researchers as crafts people;

“...they do not simply gather and write; they *compose, orchestrate, and weave*” (p. 18).

Specifically, within a critical inquiry, however, I am mindful of my privilege as I work to honour the stories of participants who have come forward to share their experiences with me. As I have crafted and carried out this project, I have taken heed of the advice offered by (Kincheloe, et al., 2018) as they remind us that “...research ... [is] a power-driven act,” viewing the

... critical researcher-as-bricoleur [who] abandons the quest for some naive concept of realism, focusing instead on the clarification of his or her position in the web of reality and the social locations of other researchers and the ways they shape the production and interpretation of knowledge. (In Denzin & Lincoln, 2018, p. 432)

Research Question or Problem: “Story-o-typing”

I have used arts-informed, and narrative methodologies to craft a study concerning the identity development of educationally stratified students. For this purpose, I use William Lowell Randall’s (2014) work, *The Stories We Are*, and his concept of *story-o-typing* to assist participants in telling their school story concerning how they have been impacted and shaped by

imposed story-o-typing; the “outside-in stories” or “the story told to them [often about them and who they are] by others.” Participants were offered the opportunity to voice how educational stratification has affected them through arts-informed methodologies (collage representations) and narrative and dialogical descriptions of their collage to portray and illustrate their experience of *story-o-typing*. In this quest, participants have been asked to answer the question, “How have you been story-o-typed by the public education system?”

Utilizing crystallization. Over this chapter I explain the methodological underpinnings of my study and the approaches taken to assist participants with the telling of their school stories. Moreover, I explain my positioning as an investigator, incorporating the ideologies and philosophies described in previous chapters with methodological ideologies and processes discussed and defined over this chapter to make clear the construction, facilitation, and analysis of research findings, while likewise naming the axiological values taken to ensure transparency and crystallization of the data. Crystallization of the data comprises a “post-modern approach to triangulation” where two or more methods within multi-genre data production, collection, and analysis, are used to ensure validity of the data and to make clear the dichotomy of themes and nuances that evolve from the research findings (Ellingson, 2014, p. 443). To clarify, Ellingson (2009) describes “crystallization as sitting between social constructionist ... and critical paradigms ...” combining,

...multiple forms of analysis and multiple genres of representation into a coherent text or a series of related texts building a rich and openly partial account of a phenomenon that problematizes its own construction, highlights researchers’ vulnerabilities and positionality, makes claims about socially constructed meanings, and reveals the indeterminacy of knowledge claims even as it makes them. (p. 4)

Ellingson (2014) specifically mentions and justifies using crystallization as a framework in the construction of relationship-oriented research for two reasons. The first reason pertains to enriching the data and developing it beyond field notes often seen in traditional qualitative research. She names inviting research modalities that provide for “evocative details, compelling narratives, or aesthetic flourishes” as ways to deepen our understanding of human experience (p.443). She goes on to name the second reason; to comprehend the living of daily life and the relationships made through daily interactions. She explains that it is helpful to have tangible measures to bring forth the shades, tones, and subtleties of lived experience within relationships. In making this point, Ellingson (2014) writes, “Crystallization is ideal for constructing portraits of everyday relating because it brings together vivid, intimate details of people’s lives shared via storytelling and art with the broader relational patterns and structures identified through social scientific analyses” (p. 443).

My study uses these described principles of crystallization to bring together divergent methodological approaches which are consistently extended through to the analysis and representation of study findings. Ellingson (2009) advises how various approaches and data points can achieve, “...depth, through the compilation not only of many details but also of different forms of representing, organizing, and analyzing those details.” (p. 10). Thus, I have considered and applied a combination of methods, keeping to the suggestions paraphrased from Ellingson’s (2009) writings where she suggests that qualitative researchers plan for and capture the following features: Detailed descriptions, explanations, and understandings derived from a combination of qualitative methodologies and methods concerning a specific problem or a group phenomenon; Knowledge production across a range of postpositivist approaches, which comprise at least two qualitative approaches; Combining two or more methods such as a piece of

writing or poetry with another form of information or knowledge, like sculpture, art, or a creative piece; Using researcher reflexivity over multiple processes that could include the design of the project, the analysis of the data, and so on; and to again use Ellingson's (2009) words directly, "eschew[ing] positivist claims to objectivity and a singular, discoverable Truth in favor of embracing knowledge as situated, partial, constructed, multiple, embodied, and enmeshed in power relations" (p. 10). Taking these suggestions forward, I delve deeper into my plan for crystallization to explain why and how I have used both artistic and narrative methodologies to construct my project.

Arts-Informed Methodologies

John Dewey (2009) has said that "every artist must have a method, a technique in doing his [sic] work" (p. 129). Arts-informed methodologies are very deliberately positioned alongside narrative storying and restorying to help participants think about and explore the complexities, extractions, and interpretations invited from their personal account of school experience. Creating art as a starting exercise offered participants the opportunity to visually tell their stories, thus enhancing dialogic or narrative methodological approaches used while offering participants the opportunity to speak in a language that goes beyond the boundaries of verbal articulation. Methodologies used within this project are informed by arts-based research. While arts-based research *exclusively* uses and anchors research processes within the arts, I diverge from using arts-based approaches in their entirety here deferring more to an arts-informed methodological approach. Cole and Knowles (2008) frame, "Arts-informed research [as] ... a mode and form of qualitative research in the social sciences that is influenced by, but not based in, the arts" (In Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 59). Arts-informed research is heavily influenced by arts-based theories and draws upon the central idea of arts-based research given that both approaches

honour alternative languages and modes of creative expression, evoking and bringing to the surface what is often intangible and cannot be said. Principles and values of arts-based research inform the central intentions and thrust of this project, yet it does not completely consume the methodological processes taken, only partially. This project instead draws significantly on the arts as a starting exercise where imagination is cultivated through an invitation to speak visually and creatively, as an alternative to verbal dialogue. Moreover, my project uses arts-based philosophies and theories to shape and encapsulate a creative and emergent research process, including the ensuing analysis, and representation of results. Thus, there is an intentional creative opening for the arts within my project, accordingly it is arts-informed. I also draw from other methodological approaches, namely narrative research, to affect and evolve the way in which the research is conducted, interpreted, and crystallized. In doing this, I broadly apply Gerber's (2022) arts-based methodological assumptions and practices to embrace acceptance of "... the unknown, [which requires] trust the creative process, engage[ment] in emergent rather than predictive methods, [the] value [of] imaginative knowledge, and [to] equate the impact of imaginative arts-based [or arts-informed] investigative perspectives with dominant traditions" (p. 6).

Using art making as a feature of my research is thought to hold much possibility while it prompts and probes for deeper meaning. The multidimensionality provoked by non-linear expression distinctly inspires imagination and discovery, allowing for abstract articulations that are deeply personal, going beyond what can be expressed through the spoken word. Cole and Knowles describe the unique potential of arts-informed processes given "... the power of art forms to reach diverse audiences and the importance of diverse languages for gaining insights

into the complexities of the human condition” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 59). Baden and Wimpenny (2014) echo the appeal of using the arts within research as they assert its,

...potential to challenge and transform but also that it is available and accessible to a wide and diverse audience. Such accessibility means not just that an audience can see and read the work but also they can understand, engage, and relate to it” (p. 2).

While Osei-Kofi (2013) posits, “... art making stimulates imagination, creativity, innovation, and exploration in children and adults alike. To engage in anti-oppressive work, to challenge the norms of what it means to know and how we come to know, imagination is essential” (p. 139).

Maxine Greene (1995) expounds upon the powerful influence imagination has on art and making meaning of lived experience as she wisely offers, “Imagination may be our primary means of forming an understanding of what goes on under the heading of ‘reality’; imagination may be responsible for the very texture of our experience.” (p. 140). With these assertions top of mind, arts-informed methodologies have been selected as an adjunct to narrative methodologies and methods because of their accessibility and their capacity to foster genuine expression through a language that is uniquely personal, subjective, and falls outside of dominant and prevailing communicative constructions. Indeed, arts-informed research approaches can help the individual stretch beyond the known in search of story and a deeper personal truth. And by taking creative approaches to research, we can possibly move to greater personal and societal understanding and consciousness. Camargo-Borges (2018) comment on this point as they write, “... creative approach[es] to research challenges universal knowledge and its inclination to predict and control, instead inviting a closer look at local knowledge, at different voices and perspectives, and at the dynamics of our ever-changing world/society” (p. 96). While Cole and Knowles (2008) champion the anti-oppressive quality incited through the arts, as they convey,

Arts-informed research is part of a broader commitment to shift the dominant paradigmatic view that keeps the academy and community separated: to acknowledge the multiple dimensions that constitute and form the human condition—physical, emotional, spiritual, social, cultural—and the myriad ways of engaging in the world—oral, literal, visual, embodied. (p. 60)

Mcdermott (2010) speaks to this point as well and suggests how the arts can be used in classrooms to support students as he writes, “such artistic experiments parallel ways to empower students and teachers to do the same with curricula, instruction, and assessment” (p. 12). Thus, artistic processes and activities can easily be used to bridge learning opportunities in classrooms as they are accessible, valid, anti-oppressive pedagogical approaches. Perhaps the outcomes derived from this sort of inquiry may help us to better understand how creative classroom strategies are valid and suitable pedagogical approaches that can help tangibly demonstrate and communicate the intangible, thus contributing to the call to create truly inclusive schools.

The arts intrinsically embrace multiple ways of knowing through creative expression and are therefore inherently inclusive and anti-oppressive. Creative or arts-informed methods nicely stand counter to a system of education that often demands standardization and conformity to a set code of conduct and norms. Taking the advice from the scholars cited, my project supports and propels creative, anti-oppressive methods, while it attempts to provoke, inspire, cultivate, and capture possibility and new ways of thinking and working with students through an assembling of marginalized voices. My study invites and allows participant articulations to be seen, felt, and heard as it attempts to connect the reader of this work with the impact marginalization has had on their emotional wellbeing and their school and career trajectories. What better way to convey such distinctly personal messages than through the arts.

Narrative Methodological Approach & Assumptions

Given that identity development is of interest over this inquiry, narrative methodologies/ methods are recognized as congruent with studying identity formation (Larsson and Sjöblom, 2009, p. 274). Narrative methods applied to this study are associated with the field of psychology and human development: how identity has taken shape through making sense of experience and the inner world, self-talk, and internal messaging of the participant, based on internalizing the *outside-in story* or messaging. The elicitation of the hidden identity, or untold story, that lies just under the surface is of paramount importance to this inquiry. Seeking the untold story is key psychological research, as is discussed by Larsson and Sjöblom (2009) as they offer, "... the researcher must also try to apprehend the more or less submerged stories or what is not said in order to get the whole story or a more complex understanding of the history" (p. 275). Indeed, what has previously gone unsaid is of great importance to my study, and likewise to the consciousness of participants who may benefit from dialogue and new understandings of how their personal identity has been externally shaped.

Block and Weatherford (2013) write, "The narratives that are relevant today are stories that communicate the subjective realities of individuals rather than grand narratives that categorize people into groups based on positivism" (p. 500). While Creswell (2009) explains, narrative research is a strategy of inquiry in which the researcher studies the lives of individuals and asks one or more individuals to provide stories about their lives. This information is then often retold or restoried by the researcher into a narrative chronology. (p. 13)

I have offered this basic and simplistic definition of narrative inquiry because, from the literature consulted, narrative inquiry applications are varied and are often tied to the philosophical

underpinnings of the disciplines undertaking the study (Clandinin & Connolly, 1990; Larsson & Sjöblom, 2009; Riessman, 1993). I admittedly get caught between the ambiguity of narrative approaches related to methodology versus narrative methods, as they are closely tied to one another and overlap significantly. Perhaps then it is helpful to think about ‘how’ narrative methodologies have been applied over my study. This ‘how’ I speak of informs my way of being as an investigator through this work and continues to how I have chosen to capture and represent the stories. It likewise includes my restorying approach, as well as how all of these functions and processes fit together and are anchored by a specific set of values.

As I look across the vast landscape of narrative inquiry possibilities, I will speak about what resonated for me as I describe the series of methodological approaches I took, that sometimes overlap with one another. I attribute this overlapping similarly to the creation of a piece of art; an intuitive, organic, non-linear approach; often abstract and intangible as it takes shape to become a finished product, but there is reason and purpose in its creation, culminating in hopefully something beautiful and appreciated. To this end, my initial process of discovery started as I quickly recognized the essence or heart of my study would reside within narrative methodologies and methods; one could say both verbal and artistic methodologies exist within the narrative inquiry camp. Both invite ways of expression and communication, and both serve to tell or harness a story in different ways, yet they are always anchored in expression or voice.

There is a common and implicit theme easily recognized in narrative approaches and that theme “... is synonymous with story” (Larsson & Sjöblom, 2009, p. 274). As Lewis (2011) writes, “Story is central to human understanding—it makes life livable, because without a story, there is no identity, no self, no other” (p. 505). While Saleebey (1996) justifies how narratives can be sources of healing where “...personal and familial stories of falls from grace and

redemption, failure and resurrection, and struggle and resilience may also provide the diction, symbols, metaphors, and tools for rebound” (Lifton, 1993, p. 299). Similarly, Clandinin (2009) asserts, “... narrative inquirers embrace the metaphoric quality of language and the connectedness and coherence of the extended discourse of the story entwined with exposition, argumentation, and description” (p. 29). Riessman (1993) similarly notes yet diverges a bit as she extends, “The story metaphor emphasizes that we create order, construct texts in particular context” (p. 1). Indeed, there is much to consider and account for when crafting a narratively oriented inquiry; however, it is Riessman’s assertion of creating some kind of order in narrative research that weighs heavily on me. While I know the task of research must be clearly defined to be properly understood in scholarly terms, as previously discussed, I believe I must honour an emergent, arts-informed approach over this project, relying upon the creative process to lead the way. The facilitation of research is organic in this regard, with the creative and conversational process naturally evolving from being present and anchored by authentic relationships with participants and allowing the dialogic process to unfold, centred on the idea of *story-o-typing*. I naturally lean toward the abstract as a way of thinking and being, and this approach seems right and appropriate given the arts-informed leanings of this work and the overall intention and commitments of this project.

The scholarly advice accessed from those who have established and worked in the field of narrative inquiry has undoubtedly helped me find my way. With their advice at the forefront of my mind, I have taken care to convey participant stories as Riessman (1993) would say, “to represent experience” (p. 9). Clandinin and Connelly (2013) expand on this point as they discuss how research narratives evolve; from conversations, to transcriptions, to narration of story, and

the themes unearthed through co-constructed conversations. Indeed, the many layers and levels of story emerge allowing the “research story” to be told. They explain:

We are, in narrative inquiry, constructing narratives at several levels. At one level it is the personal narratives and the jointly shared and constructed narratives that are told in the research writing, but narrative researchers are compelled to move beyond the telling of the lived story to tell the research story. (p. 10).

With this advice in mind, the task at hand is to “tell the research story” concerning student *story-typing* and to ensure the formation, foundation, and composition of my inquiry, and the representation of participant accounts, is based on their first-person narratives. In doing this, I use a critical paradigm to set the blueprint for this work, complemented by arts-informed (collaging) and narrative methodologies/methods to architecturally construct storied experience and the subsequent data that was acquired, managed, and thoughtfully compiled. It is research with a juxtaposition between a loosely ordered research plan and an allowance of what emerges, appears, and unfolds from the creative process of collaging and storying experience. It is through the use of arts-informed or collaging methods that I attempt to provide an opening for alternative ways of knowing and expression, while making space for reflection on the experience of *story-typing* by students who were *educationally stratified*. The story is told through artistic articulation, initially, allowing for imaginal depictions to form their own language; to be accessed subliminally and visually comprehended; for intuition to inform through a voice that surfaces from deep within, appearing in a language or vocabulary that expands beyond what can be linguistically expressed. I discuss the merits of collaging in this regard in my section on methods, but for the purpose of this methodological discussion, I reference the arts as a starting exercise and as a way to attend to participants; to summon an understanding of lived experience

from them. The second tangible way I have attended to seeking knowledge is through my manner and approach to this work as a counsellor. Thus, I begin with my personal and philosophical positioning as I come to this work from my experience of being a counsellor.

Rogierian Values & Narrative Counselling Strategies Underpin Facilitation of Research

Given my background as a professional counsellor, having training and experience in person-centred and narrative counselling strategies, I worked with participants using these ideologies and modalities. Person-centred counselling, also known as Rogerian counselling, was developed by psychologist Carl Rogers (1961) in the 1940s. Rogers believed that to establish trust and rapport, the therapist or counsellor must possess personal congruence, thus allowing for presence, acceptance and unconditional positive regard within therapeutic counsellor-client alliances and relationships. Rogers believed the client had the insight to solve their own problems when supported by a caring, attentive counsellor who accompanied and aligned with them in equal partnership. The counsellor's full acceptance of the client being a core therapeutic element as they work together in acknowledgement of personal strengths, competences, and in recognition of abilities. Rogers understood that client autonomy and choice was paramount to building confidence and self-esteem in them; the role of the counsellor being to support the wisdom and wholeness of the client and to accept them fully, just as they are. Rogers rejected the notion of placing a clinical diagnosis on the person being attended to given that this may serve to marginalize and diminish them as someone who could be defined through disorders or categorizations. Rogers believed that no person or system should hold or enforce an external impression or opinion on another person. From the writings of Rogers (1961) himself, he discusses how problems can arise from labelling deficits, as he writes:

We find ourselves under the rewards and punishments of external judgements. ‘That's good’; ‘that's naughty.’ ‘That's worth an A’; ‘that's a failure.’ ‘That's good counseling’; ‘that's poor counseling.’ Such judgments are a part of our lives from infancy to old age.... Like everyone else I find myself all too often making such evaluations. But, in my experience, they do not make for personal growth and hence I do not believe that they are a part of a helping relationship... So I have come to feel that the more I can keep a relationship free of judgment and evaluation, the more this will permit the other person to reach the point where he [sic] recognizes that the locus of evaluation, the center of responsibility, lies within himself [sic]. (pp. 54-55)

While obviously the attempt to conduct research is from a neutral stance, in critical research there is some level of value judgement, reflexivity, and praxis required and an expectancy to facilitate transformation, or to “transform ignorance” in all parties involved (Creswell, 2009; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). In doing this, I have applied a person-centred approach throughout the process as described above to encourage narratives via dialogic research processes and restorying transcripts of narratives, taking a transformational, appreciative, or strengths-based vantage.

Complementary to Rogerian facilitation practices, I used a narrative lens to invite and access stories of lived experience from participants through the use of a “narrative therapy” modality to facilitate conversations. I have worked as a counsellor over the past fifteen years and narrative therapy is a strategy I fully align with and use consistently in my counselling practice. Besley (2002) underscores the general thrust of narrative counselling through her description of this non-pathologizing strategy. She explains that it serves to empower clients/participants as she expounds, narrative counselling “... challenges and forces a re-evaluation of the dominant and to a large extent unquestioned/unquestionable ‘truths’ of traditional psychological and counselling

discourses [and] could be considered something of a ‘counter-therapy’ (p. 126). While (Gonçalves & Santos, 2009) speak of the natural alliance between narrative and dialogic approaches or methods in the process of an unfolding life and story; they explain how our stories are constructed through our interactions with different parts of the self, thus shaping and expanding story, as they offer:

The connection between narrative and dialogical processes is strengthened by the idea that life narratives can be conceived as the outcome of dialogical processes of negotiation, tension, disagreement, alliance, and so on, between different voices (or perspectives) of the self. (p. 3)

Using narrative therapy in my counselling practice, I assist the client/participant in telling their story by following the themes that emerge from story.

Taking a narrative approach as an investigator involved being an active participant in the dialogic process in the co-creation of conversations; to facilitate the flow of dialogue by asking pertinent questions relating to themes that arise from the telling of story. In this way I am assisting the participant to go deep into their story, fleshing it out based on the topics and themes that are surfacing and recurring from conversation. A narrative counsellor, and in this case an investigator, deliberately watches and listens for these recurring themes and elicits or frames questions that allow for the participant to elaborate further on themes that are pertinent to the goal of research: to empower the participant to tell their story through feedback involving an accession of their strengths as they verbally restory their lives. The intent of this approach is meant to serve or empower them in the realization of their assets as opposed to deficits. Besley (2002) speaks of the strengths-oriented, person-centred tenets of a narrative counselling approach as she writes:

The narrative approach challenges the way Western psychology generally emphasises the individual subject. It especially challenges the mental health areas where experts often appear to know more about people's lives than the people do themselves, and where the professional focus upon personal deficits emphasises one's failures or weaknesses rather than one's accomplishments and strengths. The 'expert knowledge' and the scientific outlook of traditional Western psychology which is based on the biomedical model of mental illness 'objectifies', 'individualises' and 'normalises' the subject through diagnosis that has the effect of locating the problem within the person. For the patient or client, the expert's diagnostic label of their 'self' tends to become seen as part of their essential nature and of their identity. (p. 138)

Indeed, narrative counselling empowers the individual to decide for themselves who they are through an accession and acknowledgement of assets. Narrative research methodologies, and anti-oppressive, counselling approaches naturally fit together as both situate the counsellor/investigator alongside client/participant in mutual partnership with one another. Narrative inquirers "live in the field with participants" in the co-construction of story (Clandinin, 2006, p. 47). This partnership acknowledges that "narrative inquirers cannot bracket themselves out of the inquiry but rather need to find ways to inquire into participants' experiences, their own experiences as well as the co-constructed experiences developed through the relational inquiry process" (Clandinin, 2006, p. 47).

Story-o-typing shapes the telling of story. Randall's concept of *story-o-typing* exemplifies and encapsulates how the story is to be told by participants. It draws from critical, interpretivist/constructivist ideologies and it lays the groundwork for arts-informed and narrative methodological strategies taken. I use Randall's (2014) idea of *story-o-typing* to blend or unite

interpretivist-constructivist with critical-ideological theoretical frameworks to invite and allow marginalized voices to share their impressions of the school system, their experiences, and the messages received from their engagement in public education.

Participants responded to the idea of being *story-o-typed* by the education system, initially through an arts-informed process (collage making), and then by describing their collage, providing a narrative account of lived experience as they engaged in public school. Randall (2014) expounds upon *story-o-typing* as he poignantly writes,

We have seen how our ‘self’ is in many respects a fictional construction; a house of anecdotes, a tangle of tales, a web of stories that we tell ourselves, and/or internalize from others, about our past, present, and future. As these stories change, we change. (p. 234)

With this sentiment in mind, the transforming power of interpretivist-critical approaches as they apply to research was carried out. Participant stories were funnelled and told through the lens of *story-o-typing*; allowing for participants to interpret the perceptions and judgements offered to them, and as they sifted through the process, allowing their stories to evolve and refine into a deeper understanding of the education system, which likewise provided an opening for their stories to be re-told from the vantage of personal empowerment and strength. As Mishler (2004) advises, “many different stories of their lives are current in their lifespaces” (p. 102). While Randall (2014) believes we all have a story to tell, our stories serve as powerful tools in life. More powerful still is when we share our stories with others for reflection, introspection, and learning. In his writings, Randall encourages us to embrace ourselves, our lives, and stories for they are adaptive and in progress. He believes, as do I, that we can shape and mould our stories according to our experiences and interpretation of experience. Thus, we are never fixed or stuck within our story because it is ever changing. Randall likewise asks us to be mindful of placing

our impressions on others. He asks us to be open to people without imposing our views onto others or “story-o-typing” them as he writes:

The mark of our maturity, interpersonally speaking, is of course our openness to the continual revision of this initial impression of them – this story – in light of new information about them or from them, new observed behaviours, new insights into their various ‘sides,’ and indeed, new insights into our own life story and its apparent similarities to and differences from theirs. (Randall, 2014, p. 209)

I like how Randall’s vision here relates to the original points made regarding how our stories can bring us together in acceptance of one another if we are open to seeing people for who they are, as opposed to who we think they are, thus *story-o-tying* them.

Randall (2014) offers rich imagery as he expands on and illustrates how the “fuzzy edges” attach to the *story-o-types* applied to us, as he suggests, “rather than detailed narrative portraits, they are un-filled-in outlines ...” (p. 57). Randall obviously sees *story-o-tying* as superficial and one-dimensional. In using this visual offered by Randall, it presents us with an idea of ourselves as “un-filled-in outlines,” and offers a metaphor for how our stories are unfinished and in process, similar to how a piece of art can have many interpretations and meanings. Collages created and assembled over this project, like any other piece of art, are fluid and open to interpretation with opportunities for revised meanings over time; like a story, art holds possibility for revision and ongoing evolution, meaning-making, and change.

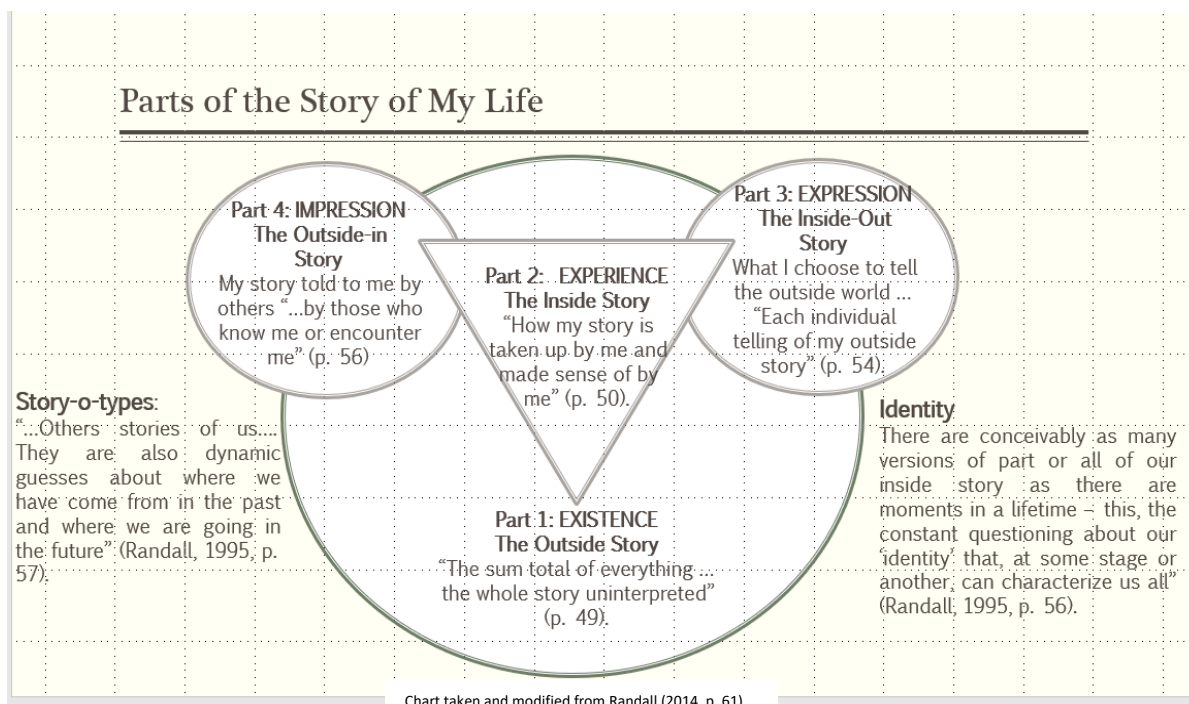
Randall’s concept of “un-filled-in outlines” is used to help participants give an account of experience providing them with a framework for their art making; they were asked to sharpen the “fuzzy edges” that undoubtedly exist by using collage to fill in their outlines with their stories of personal truth. As Randall so brilliantly explains,” Linking self-culture with self-creation, and

the art of living with the story of my life, moves us even more deeply, then into the domain of aesthetics” (p. 73). Thus, creative processes embrace the language of aesthetics and serve to open conversations, to fill-in “fuzzy edges.”

A visual of Randall’s (2014) levels of story is reproduced below (Figure 2) for the sake of clarity and shows the thematic elements (*story-o-types*, *outside-in story*, *inside story*, *inside-out story*) that are deliberately pursued over this research endeavour as I ask participants for commentary and meaning making around their experience in school.

Figure 2

Randall’s (2014) Concepts of Story



As depicted above, while there are four levels of story involved in Randall’s framework. This study places emphasis on elements of *story-o-typing* and the *outside-in story*, or the story told to me by others, to inform the *story-o-typing* exercise of collaging experience in schools. In Randall’s words, it is “... what others make of me on their own, with or (usually) without my consent” (p. 58). It is the idea of *outside-in story* that participants have deliberately reflected and

commented upon to dive deeper into their stories of marginalization, with the following questions posed to participants for greater focus: What messages were offered to you without your consent? How has this impacted you? How have these messages shaped your identity? Did it serve to impede or propel you toward a more empowered future of your own creation?

Transcription: Representing Story

Riessman (1993) offers a description of the technical aspects of transcribing research narratives and putting them into text format. This process of transcribing, while seemingly straightforward, is shaped by specific personal and theoretical positionings. Riessman (1993) extends,

Whatever form of taping used, they would ultimately have to represent it in some kind of text... Transforming spoken language into a written text is now taken quite seriously because thoughtful investigators no longer assume the transparency of language. ... Transcribing discourse, like photographing reality, is an interpretive practice.... Different transcription conventions lead to and support different interpretations and ideological positions, and they ultimately create different worlds. (pp. 12-13)

My first consideration concerning representing participant stories was made early on in the process; it involved the promise I made to each participant to provide their narratives as fully as I have received them, ensuring their stories are in their voice and initially unencumbered by any critical inferences or comments I may want to add. Indeed, the question of *story-o-typing* already set the tone for critique, thus hearing participant account is a critical appraisal of the system on its own and is thus deemed the most important pursuit in a critical inquiry. Riessman (2001) suggests an authentic, first-person way of restorying or scaffolding of the original sequence of story. This approach allows the reader to fully hear the participant voices through the entirety of

what they wanted to say in the moment the story was offered; it offers a very personal account of those who have bravely come forward, humbly offering me insight into their stories. That said, while analysis is important, I withhold my critical commentary and analysis of the narrative data until later in *Chapters Six and Seven*, where I then extend and comment upon the information acquired and analysed through a deductive approach using Randall's (2014) *Concepts of Story*.

Restorying: Creation of Meaning

Clandinin and Connelly (1990) write, "The creation of further meaning, which might be called 'the restorying quality of narrative,' is one of the most difficult of all to capture in writing" (p. 9). As explained previously, making sure to reconstruct and restory participant narratives as they were offered to me from voice to text was an important feature of restorying participant narratives. Restorying experience over my project draws on verbatim participant narratives that were collected to accompany the pictorial or collage accounts assembled and created by participants to answer the research question, "How have you been story-o-typed by public education systems?" Given the importance and ethical duty of the task, it was my intention to ensure the stories or narratives pursued, translated and retold/restoried are as thorough and pure as I have received them. Riessman (2001) refers to this approach as she describes an intended neutrality to narrative restorying as she writes, "my approach ... includes detailed transcripts of speech so that readers can, to a much greater degree, see their stories apart from their analysis" (p. 701). However, in saying this, at the same time I am also guided and reminded by Riessman (2001) of the inherent bias involved in the construction and analysis of research, as she counsels, "... the representations and boundaries chosen – is strongly influenced by the investigator's evolving understanding, disciplinary preferences, and research questions. In all of these ways, the investigator variously 'infiltrates the text'" (p. 701). While Rainbow and Sullivan (1987)

have coined the idiom “plurivocal” in reference to research texts calling attention to the idea of freeing discourse or texts “... from the motivations and subjectivity of its author, it is in public, it is intersubjective and therefore open to interpretation” (p. 13). I have referenced Riessman (2001) and Rainbow and Sullivan (1987) to justify my approach in this regard. Stories have been co-created in a trusting partnership between myself (the investigator) and participants. And while it may seem that once the interaction between myself and participant concludes, the story may appear to be a finished product. Yet, it is merely a partial rendering; a first-person account of experience offered by the restorying or retelling of participant narratives according to verbatim accounts of lived experience (the lived experienced brought forward from the past, and the experience created between myself and the participant in the moment of the research conversation); an amalgamation of moments – segments of time, suspended in the retelling but not fixed because of the multiple ways each story (visual and text) can be interpreted. Clandinin and Connelly (1990) eloquently make this point as they convey,

A written document appears to stand still; the narrative appears finished. It has been written, characters' lives constructed, social histories recorded, meaning expressed for all to see. Yet, anyone who has written a narrative knows that it, like life, is a continual unfolding (p. 9)

Indeed, I do recognize that as I have constructed this research on the problem of *story-o-typing* in schools, I have played a co-creative role in the tone and content of stories. I re-construct the narratives offered to me with full disclosure of my participation. There is pretense involved based on my problem posing question and the overlay of my own thoughts and questions posed throughout the fullness of the process. Yet stories are most certainly fluid and unfixed, based on the co-construction of the narratives given to me by participants; stories entrusted to me to

ensure a clear view is presented over the brief school stories that were obtained through this research partnership. Each capture of participant story is one iteration of experience over many possible telling's and retellings of story.

Counselling Constructs Used to Restory Narratives (Process and Representation)

With verbatim transcripts setting the tone and framing the representational approach taken, storying and restorying the narratives was also based on my orientation as a counsellor, infused with specific counselling values and ideologies; these values are tied to Rogerian and narrative counselling strategies and modalities as previously discussed. Restorying, also referred to as reauthoring, are terms defined and used in narrative therapy. Different from what is known as narrative research restorying, in counselling terms, restorying essentially means reframing the negative aspects of story from negative incidents and experiences to a more positive or appreciative understanding of story. Carr (1998) expands on this idea and provides a useful definition of restorying or reauthoring, as he writes:

...lived experience may contradict the dominant narrative ... Developing therapeutic solutions to problems, within the narrative frame, involves opening space for the authoring of alternative stories, the possibility of which have previously been marginalized by the dominant oppressive narrative which maintains the problem. (p. 486)

In other words, if something happened that was disappointing, it can be helpful to harness a positive view of the situation to help the client/participant break out of a negative mindset that may be holding them back in some manner or causing them emotional distress. To this end, re-framing question(s) posed to the client/participant may evoke a positive illumination of understanding and perspective. This can be achieved by the investigator/counsellor asking positively framed questions like, "Even though you were disappointed with how things went,

was there anything positive that you can take away from the event? What did you learn about yourself? Knowing what you now know, how might you approach things in the future to prevent the same outcome?" These types of questions can help with re-framing the event from negative to positive in a way that permits the client/participant to move past the negative event and look at things from an empowering and perhaps transformational vantage; thus, a re-storying from disempowering to an empowering narrative is the focus of this modality.

In my study, the underlying anti-oppressive intention of restorying via narrative counselling methodologies uses the empowering tenets and principles of this framework, thereby ensuring that participants were kept safe throughout the process and left the research with a renewed sense of self and story. Narrative counselling approaches epitomize and demonstrate strengths-based pedagogies in action. I am making clear this positioning within my research process and representation as the methodological approach taken to story participant narratives and restory narrative research texts/transcriptions exhibits this partiality and the tenets of narrative counselling; which means that research conversations and the next layer of processing transcriptions have lent to restorying narratives through a deliberate lens of empowerment, where participants were given permission and the right to claim authorship or "author-ity" and agency over their stories (Randall, 2014). While I (the investigator) likewise claim a partial, subjective, and reflexive responsibility in this authorship. It is not authorship for control of the narrative, but authorship to give authority to the participants in the telling of their stories; to assist them in claiming for themselves what happened to them in school and how this has impacted and shaped who they have become as a result of their experiences. Randall (2014) has framed the expression or phrase, "author-ity over our stories" to explain how we often give others authority to shape

our stories for us, but the intention of this research is to allow participants to claim *author-ity* thus *authorship* over their stories. This point is elegantly made by Randall (2014) as he explains:

The story untold is the life unlived. The more un-storied existence we can transform into existence, that is, the more untold experience we are able to express, then the more powerfully and profoundly can our self-creation proceed: the more author-ity we have over the storying and re-storying of our own lives.” (p. 281).

Thus, participant *author-ity* over their stories, in addition to my intentional narration of participant contributions and restorying narratives using person-centred, narrative, and strengths-based strategies and approaches, were integral considerations regarding the process of framing, interpreting, and representing participant stories from an anti-oppressive, asset-oriented perspective. Often disempowering stories are difficult to tell, but they can be made easier through a perspective of strength, hope, and self-determination. Or as Randall (2014) expounds, “... the wider our awareness of the stories we are, then the more power we have in relation to others ... the better we are able to cope with their tendency to ‘story-o-type’ us ...” (pp. 281-282).

Creative, arts-informed, and narrative research methodologies opened opportunities for authentic connection, and allowed me to work alongside participants as equals and as co-creators of knowledge. Following the conjecture of the participant, the process was person-centred and honoured creative approaches to unearth personal story, and thus it was emergent; it went where it needed to go, placing the student-participant in control of what was discussed and discovered. As Butler-Kisber (2002) offers in her commentary on qualitative forms of research, “This form of inquiry mandates that researchers situate themselves in their studies and work intimately with their participants. In so doing they create relationships that help to ensure that participant voices

and perspectives are respected and reported” (p. 230). Similarly, Besley (2002) echoes this approach from a narrative therapy lens by offering, “Narrative therapists do not present themselves as distant, objectively neutral experts who diagnose problems and prescribe solutions and treatments, but as curious, interested and partial participants in the person’s story” (p. 129).

The research process outlined here and expanded on below will serve to demonstrate the values and principles of qualitative research. I have fully embraced the opportunity of creating collaborative relationships, where “values such as egalitarianism, cultural sensitivity, and respect ... guide the qualitative researcher in her or his relationship with research participants” (Morrow, 2007, pp. 218-219). In constructing anti-oppressive, person-centred research of this nature, the arts allowed for the conceptualization and interpretation of lived experience through the accession of a visual or aesthetic language, or “seeing story” (White, 2021). This extended an unlimited aesthetic vocabulary that was, as Maxine Greene’s (1995) asserts, an invitation to,

... tap the full range of human intelligence and that as part of our pedagogy, we enable them [students] to have a number of languages to hand and not verbal or mathematical languages alone. Some children may find articulation through imagery.... (p. 57)

Indeed, creativity, imagination, and possibility were paramount to this process and allowed for an uncovering of personal truth within participant lived experience.

Member Checking for Accuracy and “Reading Experience”

Narratively oriented research requires proper vetting by those who have a vested interest in the work. This does not necessarily mean that the work is a finished or final product, but instead ready to be taken in and examined to ensure it is soundly supported and erected through proper scholarly preparation, grounding, and citation. Accuracy of story and its positioning is of paramount concern and whether its presentation in this regard is acceptable by those who have

contributed to its content and creation (the participants). Riessman (1993) clarifies this process as she writes,

... the final level of representation ... comes as the reader encounters the written report.

Perhaps an early draft was circulated to colleagues and their comments were incorporated into the so-called final product, or perhaps published work was returned to the people it is about, who may or may not recognize their experience in it or like how they are portrayed. (pp. 14-15)

With that said, this specific qualitative study is a subjective account of personal story, often associated with the setting and audience where it is being told (Randall, 2014). It acknowledges that stories are ever-changing and malleable. Stories are dependent on what the teller can access within themselves at that particular moment and what they deem appropriate to reveal or disclose in any narrative offering or retelling of story. Mishler (2004) picks up on this point as he writes, “retellings are often quite different from each other; that is, we story our lives differently depending on the occasion, audience, and reason for the telling” (pp. 102-103). Randall (2014) likewise chimes in with a similar sentiment as he conveys, “... our story refuses to come out the same way twice” (p. 185). While he later conveys,

...the bottom line is that we never know fully what the story is. The kind of story it is an ongoing mystery to us; discerning it, an adventure in itself ... what is told can be retold in a virtual infinity of versions (Randall, 2014, p. 206).

This research involves the telling of story over a critical positioning. Kincheloe, et al. (2011) discuss how critical research can “... work as a form of social or cultural criticism” (p. 164).

Within this ideological approach they concretely lay out a clear overview of requisites and advise that a criticalist researcher works from the following assumptions:

All thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are social and historically constituted; Facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription; The relationship between concept and object and between signifier is never stable or fixed and is often mediated by the social relations of capitalist production and consumption; Language is central to the formation of subjectivity (conscious and unconscious awareness); Certain groups in society and societies are privileged over others ...; Oppression has many faces, and focusing on only one at the expense of others ... often elides the interconnections among them; and finally, mainstream research practices are generally, although most often unwittingly, implicated in the reproduction of systems of class race, and gender oppression (Kincheloe, McLaren & Steinberg, 2011, p. 164).

Recognizing the subjective and critical aspects of my project, these points, in addition to Randall's (2014) framing of *story-o-typing*, discussed earlier, served as the critical lens in which the information sought and collected was viewed, storied, analysed and represented. Given that consciousness raising was central to the intent of this study, critical commentary was an implicit commitment to evoke and evolve participant understanding of society, as it provided an opening for the possibility of personal emancipation in the deconstruction and release of dominant ideologies and oppressive systems of belief. Thus, critical research is ... "unembarrassed by the label 'political' and unafraid to consummate a relationship with emancipatory consciousness" (Kincheloe, McLaren, and Steinberg, 2011, p. 164). Therefore, any reading of the enclosed, encapsulated research narratives should be aware of the critical orientation of this study. Those taking up readership of this work will note the positioning of this study as they take in what has been expressed by participants, which have been legitimized and validated by the deliberate and

planned efforts undertaken for participant vetting and member checking and peer scholarly review.

CHAPTER FIVE: METHODS

Ayers and Ayers (2011) believe “the answers will be found in what kind of educational projects we are able to generate, what kind of resistance we undertake, and what kind of alternatives we perceive or uncover or imagine or create” (p. 106). To this point, Fox (2013) shares her impressions of conducting anti-oppressive research with vulnerable or marginalized students as she warns, “structurally, formal research practices and the discursive context of traditional academia emerge as fundamental barriers to meaningful participation in research for young people” (p. 995). With these assertions in mind, I took care to implement research in a setting that placed participants at ease, using anti-oppressive pedagogical or research practices, which are in keeping with “... experiential teaching methods [which] are ... alternatives to hegemonic and often exclusionary approaches to learning and contributing ...” (Lorenzetti & Walsh, 2014, p. 53). The aim of this project is to empower, rather than disempower the participant (Enge, Hodges & Cutts, 2011). I believe this research project served to honour and support the participant; placing them in the position as having “author-ity” over their story (Randall, 2014). My role as investigator being to facilitate and harness creativity and conversation between equals (participant and investigator) to uncover more of the hidden self and to bring to light what is known and what is unknown. As Randall (2014) suggests, the creation of our lives, the process of “self-creation,” is also a co-creative process where we work in partnership with others in the unremitting discovery of ourselves to cultivate boundless human possibility (p. 39).

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Once ethics clearance was obtained by the University Research Ethics Board (UREB) at Mount Saint Vincent University, I set forth using purposive or purposeful sampling techniques or

specifically snowball methods to seek three to six prospective adult research participants. It was thought that adult participants may be more apt toward participation if they were actively pursuing their high school diploma or GED, and this was the primary criterion for participation in the study. Adult high school students undoubtedly have rich stories to share concerning their younger experiences in public schools and can potentially provide for better study participation and motivation. Likewise, having some distance between where they are today versus who they were as younger school aged children was seen as beneficial. I posted approved video advertisements on social media platforms (Facebook and Kijiji), and I also posted approved printed advertisements at local public libraries, hopeful that suitable community members would come forward or spread the word within their circle about my research project.

After several unsuccessful months of pursuing participants through passive advertising, I decided to ramp up my efforts by seeking prospective participants at local private adult high schools. Thus, my sampling techniques shifted to homogenous sampling as I decided to focus my efforts on locating prospective participants within schools that provide adult education services. To this end, I identified sites that would produce candidates who met the criterion sought (adult high school students who were enrolled in high school or GED program). I met with the directors of two private adult high schools. The director at one school permitted me to offer several presentations to students enrolled in their General Education Diploma (GED) programming. Through these presentations, I provided students with an overview of my project and invited questions and participation. From these presentations I had six students come forward to show an interest in participating. I then arranged for individual informed consent meetings with prospective students to review the project in greater depth and to outline the advantages and risks

of participation. After the informed consent process was finalized, I had successfully obtained full consent from three suitable research participants who agreed to participate in my study.

My reasoning for seeking adult students who have yet to achieve their high school diploma was to ensure a pool of candidates who had experienced some form of educational stratification. Additional criteria that strengthened their candidacy for participation and selection included students who were on IPPs (Individual Program Plans); students who have been offered a diagnosis such as a learning disorder; students who are neurodiverse in some way; or students who had behavioural challenges in youth. Consequently, all three participants selected for this study met the above outlined criteria. Moreover, working with adults allowed for more reflective responses simply by the sheer fact that participants have lived more life and can expound on experience with more maturity and depth, with some distance from traumatic experience. In therapeutic settings, and from my counselling experience, it is not helpful, advisable, or ethical to counsel or work with people in an extensive or intensive way while they are in the midst of trauma or unease. Crisis counselling is appropriate within trauma, but true therapeutic work is typically reserved for later once there has been distance from the traumatic experience. Indeed, it is often beneficial and appropriate to wait some time to allow for distance from the trauma so that meaning making can be made in a safe, relaxed, and introspective manner. Thus, three adults were sought and successfully obtained for participation in this study. Their real names have been changed to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. I introduce them now in advance of their stories to acquaint readers with their names/pseudonyms and to inform readers of their background and suitability for this study. A brief overview of participant learning style is also offered below to qualify the type of educational stratification experienced and to justify the selection criteria for their inclusion in this study:

Participant 1: Mary – Mary is a 21-year-old woman who attended public school in New Brunswick. She did not graduate public high school due to family issues and now calls Dartmouth, NS her home. She had medical and learning challenges in her youth, as well as family struggles, which contributed to her being educationally stratified in public school. She is currently enrolled in an adult learning program to obtain her GED. She plans on joining the police force after achieving her GED.

Participant 2: Carly – Carly is a 45-year-old female. She has a neurodivergent learning profile and was enrolled in Learning Centre programming in her youth, attending public school in Dartmouth, NS. She has special needs and requires assistance to write given a physical disability which affects her arms/hands. She likewise had behavioral issues while attending public school. While she graduated from a local high school, she is currently enrolled in an adult learning program given her love of learning and her desire to fully engage in her community. She was screened into this study despite having her high school diploma because she met all other study selection criteria.

Participant 3: Ella – Ella is a 41-year-old female from Dartmouth, Nova Scotia who is currently enrolled in a local Adult Learning Network program to earn her GED. Ella struggled while in public school due to having “learning disabilities” which impacted her ability to read and communicate. She was placed on a full IPP while she was in public school and she experienced bullying and prejudice from her peers and those in the system due to her struggles with reading and thus learning. Ella has Mi’kmaq ancestry, and she is now learning about her culture after feeling somewhat separated from her Indigeneity in youth.

Setting the Tone: Introduction of the Project to Prospective Participants

During an initial presentation/information session at a local learning network in early October 2022, I provided a description of my research project and invited questions from prospective participants. On that day it was later revealed to me, through participant discussions, that all prospective participants admittedly appraised my body-language, wondering if I was genuine and if I could be trusted. I mention the theme of body-language not for personal praise or accolade or because it could be perceived as complimentary to myself, but instead because it is a repeat theme and a feature of personal assessment that has been disclosed and discussed across all participant stories, as you will note within the storied and restoried accounts to follow.

Body Language: Initial Theme Emerges as the Project is Introduced

To briefly visit the theme of body-language, participants later described their initial impressions of my body-language on the day of my introductory first visit with them. Indeed, we speak not only with words, but with actions, apparel, cues, signs, and signals. As a counsellor I am trained to monitor and adjust my body language knowing that the quality of my countenance and the energy I project is being taken-in and interpreted. This kind of presence is important when working with all people, and I would say even more important when working with the young.

Counsellors know that an open stance is the first step in opening emotional doors once tightly closed. Words and actions must marry together in congruency for trust to be established. I do believe these features of personhood were important and fundamental to successfully acquiring research participants for this project. Phutela (2015) explains the many forms of non-verbal communication as being, "... paralanguage, body movement, facial expressions, eye messages, attractiveness, clothing, body adornment, space and distance, touch, time, smell and manners" and likewise suggests that there are four overarching categories of nonverbal communication: "aesthetic, physical, signs, and symbols" (pp. 43-44). Thus, all features of our presentation and how we carry ourselves is taken in and interpreted by those we encounter. We all knowingly or unknowingly offer and take-in these non-verbal features as we interpret meaning and trust within relationships. When a child meets an adult and wonders whether they can trust and feel safe with them, their gaze is often cast upon the nuance of non-verbal cues to decipher whether what is being said is truthful consistent, and reliable.

On the day that I had offered my research presentation to the class of students working toward their GED, I felt this same appraisal of body-language alongside the words I had chosen

to express myself and describe or represent my research project. From previous work experiences in schools, I knew eyes and ears were carefully evaluating me for authenticity. Perhaps group thought at that moment centred on whether I could be trusted to hold space for the telling of a very personal and perhaps traumatic story. Would I represent their stories well and with care to ensure the accurate portrayal of images, words, and feelings on paper? For many in the room that day, they decided against participation, and I understood their choice. Trust is built over time, and it is hugely intimidating for most people to share their innermost thoughts and feelings with a stranger, especially when past experiences have been distressing or disappointing. For those participants who came forward, however, I felt the weight of effectively and thoroughly conveying an accurate account of their stories. I did not take this responsibility lightly knowing I had been entrusted to provide an honest and accurate account of personal experience. Moreover, I think it is important to say that my approach as a researcher or investigator mirrored my mindset and stance as a counsellor where the student is seen as the expert on themselves and where Carl Rogers' person-centred ideology places the student as an equal with the adults around them; where students or participants direct, guide, and advise the teacher (or researcher) regarding their perspectives and needs. With this in mind, my approach with all three research participants was to follow their lead and to accompany them non-judgementally and as an equal, co-creating research conversations in the telling of their school story.

The Research Environment/Location

Participants were asked and agreed to gather in a group environment, socially distanced yet alongside one another. The location for this project came about naturally and organically through discussions with the Director of a local Learning Network. She invited me to use the

space within the facility, if deemed appropriate, and advised me that the research could take place in a private and confidential board room located onsite at the network where participants were already undertaking programming to obtain their GED. This location was seen as ideal for two important reasons. Firstly, it allowed participants to engage in the project in a space familiar to them. Secondly, while undertaking the informed consent process, all participants spoke very positively about their experience attending this specific learning network. Indeed, it seemed to be a place where rapport and trust had been established and it felt safe for student participants.

Conducting research in a safe, non-intimidating environment is a feature of anti-oppressive research and was a commitment made and kept throughout this scholarly endeavour. Fox (2013) asserts that conventional research can be inherently problematic because of its privilege; she cites “constructing knowledge which maintains the status quo and promoting problematic practices ...” can create “resistance” in populations who have experienced exclusion (p. 986). In keeping with this perspective, a person-centered, co-creative, and mutually agreed upon approach to site location aided in building rapport and trust with participants to ensure that formal research processes did not recreate, resemble or ... “look like any other formal institutional context” (Fox, 2013, p. 994). Participants likewise understood that their involvement in this research project was strictly voluntary, and they knew they could withdraw from the study without question at any phase of the process.

Agreement was obtained from all participants to assemble in the board room at their school and all were thrilled with the convenience of the location and safety they already felt at their school site. Moreover, given that art making elicits ideas and invites imagination, further benefit was possible by using the learning network boardroom location as it allowed for space to reflect, move, think, and feel. The boardroom also provided a large table as a workspace with

several generously sized windows overseeing a bustling business district. Natural light added to the ambiance of the room, with sunlight beaming in to fill the expansive space.

Engaging in research and creating art can sometimes come with intimidation and resistance; however, the school location situated participants in a domain where they already felt supported and empowered. While having a group opportunity for research was thought to further diffuse possible apprehension and feelings of intimidation from participants that may be present for them as they engage in the unfamiliar process of research. To lessen apprehension, the group process was meant to harness participant wellbeing and comfort. There is power in numbers and the comradery previously established between students/participants made for relaxation within the process and meant the onus of this project was not carried by one person exclusively.

Ethical Considerations: Informed Consent, Methods Used to Record Data & Security

The research took place on October 19, 2022 with Carly and Ella and November 2, 2022 with Mary. While a group process was planned initially, as described previously, Mary had a death in her family and understandably had to defer her participation in the research process to a later date. I will explain the decision-making process regarding proceeding with two participants (Carly and Ella) on the original date scheduled while supporting Mary in the same research process as a solitary participant. That said, the research process for all involved explored personal impression as it invited participants to reflect and comment upon their experience in public schools. Merriam (2009) stresses the importance of producing research in an ethical manner given the need for valid and reliable knowledge and especially because qualitative researchers “intervene in people’s lives” (p. 209). Over this research project, the risk was considered minimal to moderate, as it acted to evoke an emotional/psychological response from participants. The risk involved in this sort of human-centred research was in keeping with the

same risks associated with undertaking counselling/therapy. The strategy or research intention deliberately asked for deeper reflection from participants on school experience and it is acknowledged that each participant is entitled to their own unique process which may generate both negative and positive thoughts and cognitions, possibly altering their impression of personal capability and their view of the world.

Consent Process

To minimize risk as much as possible, adult participants individually met with me and received a thorough informed consent process that clearly outlined the research process and the potential benefits and full risks of participation. Capacity to consent was tied to participants being adults and enrolled in an adult high school program. The logic being that participants would have been previously vetted and assessed for capacity to consent given their enrollment in an adult high school program. Thus, all participants were deemed to have the cognition to understand and consent to the benefits and risks associated with this research.

Participants were offered a list of options to access mental health/counselling services (*Appendix B*) should they require support to work through any issues of concern that were created or provoked by their involvement in this research. It is also acknowledged that the groupwork component of the research project opened participants to the possibility of a breach of confidentiality and limitations to anonymity. Participants would need to be comfortable in a group setting and agree to develop and follow clear group norms at the start of the research process and ongoing throughout at each phase of research process/meeting. Moreover, co-created, person-centered research between investigator and participant requires democratic approaches to interaction, care, rapport, and trust, and these tenets will serve to guard against the inclination of falling back into traditional power dynamics of traditional relationships concerning

expert and client, teacher and student, and researcher/investigator and participant, et cetera. That said, despite plans for democratic approaches to research, it is acknowledged that a power dichotomy still exists within most privileged relationships given social constructs and orientations, admittedly limiting complete equality within my research endeavour with participants (Berenstain, 2016; Dunne and Kotsonis, 2023; Fox, 2013).

Confidentiality parameters/anonymity. Data generated by the research process is considered the property of participants and they had the right to decline inclusion of their data should they decide to terminate their participation at any point in the process. Participants were advised that should they have second thoughts or concerns about sharing their story after data collection or when the research project/dissertation is completed, they had the right to retract their contributions and have all information, and collected data destroyed. As an assurance of confidentiality and anonymity, personal identifiers were omitted from all data sources; from data files to the translation of raw data, including formalized transcriptions and restorying of research texts and findings. For the safety, confidentiality and anonymity of participants, personal identifiers were eliminated and instead research participants are referred to or classified by using an assigned pseudonym (i.e. – Participant 1- Mary; Participant 2 - Carly; Participant 3 -Ella).

Audio files, confidentiality, generation of verbatim transcripts. Data collection involved capturing audio recordings of the conversations between myself and participants. After discussions with participants from the informed consent process, it was determined that the original plan of using video recording measures was not completely comfortable or agreeable to participants. With their input, it was instead decided that audio recordings were preferred. Consequently, conversations between myself and participants were recorded and stored on a discreet and personal audio recorder and the informed consent agreement (See Appendices) was

adjusted by hand to reflect that audio recordings would be used in place of video recordings. Participants initialed this adjustment to indicate their agreement to this change. The audio files obtained from conversations were then transferred to my personal computer for storage and transcription into printed text.

I transcribed all research texts myself by using Microsoft Office software as a first step to transcribe the audio narratives into text. To ensure accuracy of transcriptions, as a second step, I listened to audio recordings again while reading the computer-generated transcriptions to ensure that wording and grammar were cited accurately and read smoothly and correctly. I corrected any misspelled words or text omissions from auto-text generation to ensure full accuracy. I likewise eliminated any repeat words or enunciations to allow for ease of readability.

Once verbatim transcripts were intact and personally vetted for accuracy, I then re-read transcript dialogue for a third time while simultaneously listening to the audio recordings of participant narratives to ensure they were complete, accurate, and fully intact. As per my discussion in the previous methodological chapter, narratives were restored in full with person-centred or Rogerian, and narrative counselling values and approaches, while strengths-oriented investigator narrations were inserted to flesh out participant stories and to position or situate them in an appreciative inquiry framing. Thematic analysis came later in the process and appears throughout *Chapters Six and Seven*, in keeping with the emancipatory thrust and intention of this project, using Randall's (2014) Concepts of Story (story-o-typing, outside-in, inside, inside-out, et cetera) to define and point the discussion toward *story-o-typing* experienced.

Capture of Collage Installations

Collage installations were likewise recorded using digital tools and equipment; pictures of finished collages were taken on my personal camera and transferred and stored on my

password protected personal laptop computer for incorporation into the dissertation project to accompany participant stories. Layers of data/collage analysis centred on finished collage pieces which served to awaken and rouse further meaning and interpretation through investigator and participant discourse. Restorying of participant stories from verbatim transcripts was used to anchor the visual/collage research within the perspective, words, and vernacular of the participant. Thus, a creative and collage-centred study makes for a multi-vocal, multi-layered process and served as a starting place and used as "... an expressive tool that reflects reality, relays messages, and reveals meanings and employs metaphor in visual representation as a means of communication" (Russo-Zimlet, 2016, p. 802). As the creation of art is inherently personal, unconstrained, and instinctual, so is the representation and interpretation of the data, in alignment with participant and investigator reflexivity and conducive to the "artistic sensitivities ... and technical (artistic) strengths" of the researcher and participant working in harmony together is the "...spirit and purpose of the inquiry" (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 61).

Method 1: Arts-Informed Research: Collage – A Visual Telling of Story

As touched upon in the previous chapter, collage making was the first of two methods applied to this arts-informed project. Originating in the early twentieth century by artists such as Picasso and Braque, the word collage comes from the French language and means literally "to glue or paste together" (Vaughan, 2005, p. 31). Collage is cited in the literature as being a useful strategy in attending to complicated questions in the social sciences (Culshaw, 2019), and it is likewise viewed as an appropriate method for emancipatory projects given "its epistemological underpinnings suggest its potential as a method for liberatory research in and through the arts" (Vaughan, 2005, p. 31). Collage in research "is the process of using fragments of found images or materials and gluing them to a flat surface to portray phenomena" (Butler-Kisber & Poldma,

2010, p. 2). Collage is likewise viewed as an accessible method of telling a story; a method that does not require any special artistic skill. Lawrence and Paige (2016) speak to this point as they write, “Collage is another way of telling stories as participants piece together found images to tell their stories. They can also collect photographs from different time periods or take photos to tell a compelling story” (p. 70). Cole and Knowles (2008) suggest “researchers working in this way might explicitly ground the processes and representational forms in one or several of the arts” (p. 59).

Collage Making Process to See Story-o-typing: Creating a Visual Narrative

Collage making was one of two methods used to assist participants with the unfolding of their story. Collage as the starting exercise, was used to help participants with the formulation of thoughts pertaining to their experience in schools. In doing this, I asked them to ponder the idea of being “story-o-typed” by the system. The concept of *story-o-typing* offered the overarching research question which was borrowed from William Lowell Randall’s (2014) book, *The Stories We Are*. It was viewed as a useful positioning, provoking story from participants concerning how they have been stereotyped by others. Randall explains his meaning of *story-o-typing*, as he writes:

...others’ stories of us are often a far cry from those we entertain on our own. Their impressions can vary widely from our experience of ourselves. Yet they are never just static snapshots of who we are in the present; they are also dynamic guesses about where we have come from in the past and where we are going in the future. (p. 57)

Thus, Randall’s idiom, *story-o-typing*, was used to inform the methodological direction and purpose underlying this study. The concept of *story-o-typing* was defined for participants

through the informed consent process (*Appendix C*) and again as a refresher at the beginning of the collage making process.

Participants worked individually on their collage, reflecting on the idea of how they were *story-o-typed* in school. While the initial design of this study called for all three group members to work alongside each other in a group format to honour the ideology of the social construction of information, Mary was unavailable on the day of research due to an unexpected death in her family. Rather than risk losing the interest of the other two participants (Carly and Ella) who were onsite and available to proceed with the research, a decision was made in the moment to proceed with the project with the two available participants. Luckily, Mary was willing and able to engage in the research two weeks later and the research unfolded using the same process that was carried out with the previous two participants; albeit over a one-on-one process between the participant and investigator at the same location that had been arranged previously and used for the group meeting with Carly and Ella. Thus, there was consistency of location and around the application of methods within the research process for all three participants.

Following the suggestions obtained in the research literature, I set out to create a confidential and safe environment and provided all materials that research participants would need to construct their art pieces. As I facilitated the research process, the following scholarly advice was at the forefront of my thoughts, “Collage ‘provides a safe and structured resource in the difficult self-expressive process’ (Linesch, 1988, p. 47). Chilton and Scotti (2014) suggest, “Researchers ... may wish to use collage for its properties of producing representational imagery without the need for drawing skills and for integrating diverse elements to produce associations and connections” (p. 170). While Butler-Kisber and Poldma (2010) advise, “making a collage is not daunting because everyone, whether a novice or veteran, can cut and paste and ultimately

gets a sense of satisfaction with the product” (p. 5). With this wise counsel, I set upon the task of conducting my research.

In setting the tone and expectations for the collage making process, my own example of collage was provided, explaining the process of collage making to participants for the purpose of clarity (*Figure 1*). Participants were also told that there is no right or wrong approach to collage making, only permission to be genuine in whatever was activated and came forward within them by engaging in the process. These instructions seemed to reassure participants and place them at ease. They were then provided with old magazines, scissors, and glue, with instructions to select images that impacted or resonated with them when thinking about how they have been *story-otyped* for assemblage and placement on their collage.

Method 2: Narrative Method

A narrative method was used in the second phase of this project and proved useful to “understand educational experience” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). A narrative method served as a second layer of data, invited through investigator and participant dialogue, allowing for a deepening and a greater understanding of collage representations. As Block and Weatherford (2013) indicate, narrative methods recognize that “everyone has a unique, subjective tale of self that might not necessarily be associated with grand narrative. The great fragmentation of grand narratives has made it possible for every story to be told ...” (p. 501). Narrative methods in their purest form allow participants to tell and explore their personal and social stories of experience over a specific phenomenon (Larsson & Sjöblom, 2009). As Randall (2012) conveys, the intention of narrative research is to elicit “a good strong story” (p. 276). I made use of a narrative method to support the participants in the telling of “a good strong story” in description of their collage. Narrative research allows for stories to be told in rich metaphor

and provided an opportunity to access the story and the inner world of the participant in their vernacular and cadence allowing for tangible texts to be captured and made “available for direct observation” (Moen, 2005, p. 62). From there, I restoried the full-text accounts of each participant story direct from transcripts applying the tenets of Rogerian and narrative counselling modalities to shape and narrate the stories; with the next phase of analysis peering through the lens of Randall’s (2014) *Concepts of Story* (i.e. – *outside-in story, inside story, and inside out story*) to differentiate themes sought and discussed.

Narrative methods accompany the collage or pictorial account of story with a transcribed narration of collage to describe more fully the lived experience of participants and to achieve a full and vivid account of story. Narrative methods developed for use in psychology and sociology give shape to the construct of this study where “... narratives as large sections of talk ... are produced in interviews and include the interaction between the teller and the interviewer. This kind of narrative approach is often characterised by detailed transcripts of interviews” (Larsson & Sjöblom, 2009, p. 274).

The shifting from seeing story to describing it in a dialogical narrative process evolved in an organic way, with the discussion widening as participants were asked to describe their collages and offer commentary and reflection on their lived experience in schools: The collage served as a launch point, facilitating and giving permission for an evocation of thoughts and insights to surface from their visual school story. Davis and Butler-Kisber (1999) comment on this aspect of collage and how it can act as a catalyst assisting with innovative and emergent thought on experience and meaning making. Indeed, the tangibility of story enacted through collage can be a powerful mechanism making space for the unearthing of a revised and renewed perspective on experience and identity. They write:

A collage is not defined by an initial mark or series of marks, the imagery being open to continuous revision and renewal. Whatever the original intention or idea of the collagist may be, these multiple levels of processing frequently assure that the result will be "made strange," opening up the possibility for the emergence of tacitly or intuitively known content and the appearance of unexpected new associations. (p. 4)

This idea takes root in this second phase of the research process, offering participants the opportunity to reinterpret their original designs, allowing for an extended and in-depth interpretation of story, thus providing deeper insight on participant identity development.

Data Analysis and Representation Process

Perhaps at this point I have already shown in part how I have approached analyzing and representing the data over my previous discussion. I have discussed my conduct as a researcher, I have justified how I have focused the research, and also how I have chosen to analyze and represent the data through storying and restorying or retelling participant narratives. I would also like to add to what has already been said by restating that the process for me as a researcher has also been an emergent one, within a planned set of procedures. This is in keeping with arts-informed research processes, which recognize the value of open and unrestricted approaches to research and knowledge production. Yuen (2016) echoes this notion as she writes,

Notably, the process of analysis and representation ... [is] not linear. Analysis and representation occur ... simultaneously. Given the fluidity of art, the location, size, and position of images in the collage can be used to represent multiple experiences and feelings. Further, an artistic means also leads to the emergence of multi vocal understandings. That is, what begins as a single metaphor can emerge into multiple metaphors and understandings. (p. 342)

Collaging therefore served as an inspiration for the process of analysis and representation, while it is also acted as a catalyst for participant identity development as they contemplated how they have been *story-o-typed*. It involved an unstructured process, allowing for a stream of consciousness to take shape using images to convey thought by harnessing the imagination. The idea being that a picture or piece of art can convey what words cannot. It also recognizes that voice and story can emerge through creative mediums and thus is inherently anti-oppressive.

Collage stories can serve as a stand-alone piece, however, my process did go a step beyond to capture participant narrations of their collages. This allowed for storying and restorying of narratives as I sought first-person narration to foster and obtain an additional layer of meaning through data analysis and representation processes. My process of data analysis involved deliberately tagging chunks or sections of restoried narratives with subheadings to indicate whether there were themes of *outside-in story*, *inside-story*, and *inside-out story*. Once all narrative stories were fully restoried and labelled with subheadings in this regard, I then organized and compiled all headings together to determine the common and overall themes and to accurately represent the research findings. Metaphors and meaning stemming from collage-representations were likewise viewed to decipher and explore additional themes; those things unsaid yet distinguishable visually and related to Randall's (2014) concepts of story to explore deeper meaning of visual and verbal narratives and information. It has been a process of interpreting and representing what was said, and unsaid, but expressed visually while interpreted somewhat abstractly and intuitively. As Lawrence and Paige (2016) convey, "Artistic expression can unlock a part of the brain where stories reside but are not in our immediate conscious awareness" (p. 69). In summation of my process, an elicitation of results or tangible themes

stemming from collages, dialogue, restored narratives, and reflexivity will make up the next chapter.

I ultimately believe that, through all phases of the research process, a greater understanding and illumination of participant experience in schools was gleaned and discerned. From data collection to data analysis, meaning was sought from the entirety of the research process. Cole and Knowles (2008) convey the importance of honouring all phases of arts-informed research, as they write, “from purpose to method to interpretation, arts-informed research is a holistic process and rendering that runs counter to more conventional research endeavours that tend to be more linear, sequential, compartmentalized, and distanced from researcher and participant” (pp. 66-67). Thus, contributions to understanding were emergent in nature, through collaborations between myself and participants followed “...*the creative inquiry process* defined by an openness to the expansive possibilities of human imagination” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 61).

CHAPTER SIX: STORYING AND RESTORYING THE DATA

In this chapter, each participant is introduced once again, in conjunction with their collage installations or representations, followed by full transcripts that are shaped or restored and retold using narrative counselling tenets and a descriptive, strengths-based approach to restorying. To make good use of all data sources, as discussed previously, I have placed deliberate emphasis on restorying participant stories as thoroughly and closely as possible to how they were received, encapsulating the entirety of my dialogue with participants in the sequence of events it was offered to me. To this point, participants verbally described their visual representations and their interpretations of *story-o-typing* through narration of their collage. For the purpose and ease of reading restored narratives, I have taken out repeat words and repeated enunciations, such as *uh, um, like*, et cetera, for clarity and to focus the results on the story itself and the recognizable themes. Researcher reflexivity has been pursued through transparency by including the full research dialogue with each participant, and by explaining my approach to facilitating and restorying research and resulting texts via narrative counselling modalities and strengths-based approaches to facilitating conversations. This process has culminated in the restored narratives that appear through this chapter. I have placed an intentional effort on the purity of participant stories and the information they naturally and progressively convey.

Readers of this work will note the varying length and tone of each participant narrative. While conversation and verbal expression came naturally to one participant, Mary, the other two participants, Carly and Ella, felt more comfortable expressing themselves and telling their story visually through collage making. This is evidenced in the length of each narrative, with Mary's story demonstrating her ease in communication as she offered a lengthy account of her personal and school history and life experiences. The story seemed to naturally flow for Mary as she

eagerly explained her school experience through referencing her collage and expanding on the meaning behind each carefully placed word art/picture. Carly and Ella were more tentative in their telling of school story and needed to be gently nudged and supported with active questioning to have their stories unfold in a verbal manner. My impression of Carly and Ella's hesitation to enter into conversation or dialogue was due to their apparent insecurity around learning. They were both concerned about getting the answers correct and had wanted their teacher to accompany them in the research process so that she could ensure they were approaching the task of collage making and telling their stories in an appropriate manner. I reminded them and explained again that the process needed to be confidential as we reviewed the informed consent document once more to make sure they were comfortable with the process. I reiterated that their participation meant their teacher was not eligible to participate in the process. I also reassured them that whatever they had to say would be appropriate and suitable and that they need not worry about making a mistake. With this assurance, they agreed to continue, and we proceeded together trusting in the unfoldment of the process. Butler-Kisber (2008) speaks to the "importance of proximity between researchers and participants" and how "attention must be paid to building trust and relationships" (p. 273). It was my task to ensure participants felt comfortable, supported, and safe throughout the entirety of the research process and beyond. Taking a person-centred, strengths-oriented approach seemed to help with creating an opening and trust in co-created conversations. I think it is imperative to highlight as well that the arts-informed process of collage making served to open conversations and particularly allowed for Carly and Ella to flourish and feel successful in this process as it provided them a comfortable way of expression that went beyond spoken words. This is again a feature of arts-informed approaches and in particular where collage is suitable as visual portrayals can conger and portray

intentions and meaning when words are not easy or forthcoming; thus different ways of knowing and expression can be accessed through pictorial representations (Butler-Kisber, 2008).

Before moving on to participant stories, it is also important to note the context of participant stories and when they took place. Mary's story provides a more recent account of school experience as she is a younger adult and attended high school during the years of 2015 to 2018, two years after the *New Brunswick Inclusive Education Policy* was enacted. Carly and Ella on the other had attended high school in the 1990s prior to the broad initiation of inclusive education initiatives in Canada. They were instead educated during a time when overt streaming/stratification practices related to placement in special education programs.

It has been an honour and privilege to facilitate and be a part of this process and to have had the opportunity to include these storied experiences in my dissertation project. I would like to sincerely thank each participant for their openness, their generosity of time, and for trusting me and trusting the process.

Mary's Story

Mary is a 21-year-old woman who attended public school in New Brunswick. She did not graduate public high school due to family issues and now calls Dartmouth, NS her home. She had medical and learning challenges in her youth, as well as family struggles, which contributed to her being educationally stratified/story-o-typed in public school. She is currently enrolled in an adult learning program to obtain her GED. She plans on joining the police force after achieving her GED.

Figure 3

Mary's Collage



Building Trust and Sharing Her Story

As I sought participants for my study, Mary was the first to come forward with interest in sharing her school story. She was eager to tell her story about being *story-o-typed*, stating that she wanted to help others and to let them know they are not alone. Another factor in her wanting to join the study was the connection she initially felt toward me as I introduced and described the

nature of the study during the participant advertisement phase of the research process. Mary begins our dialogue by disclosing how she was quietly evaluating me from her classroom seat, as she explained over our research meeting/conversation by offering:

Personally, walking in, like when you walked into the classroom, I was the only one that didn't say anything, because I sat there and I read your body language. Like, is this woman full of sh**?* Does she even believe in what she's studying? You know, like that type of thing. From the second you walked in until the second you left, I said, I was like, I need to do this for her because one, it will help you. And two, it is going to help me a lot, knowing that my story is going to be out there for someone just to come by and go, 'I'm not alone.' Because that's all I needed as a kid. Just one little note of reassurance, 'Hey, you're not alone. Hey, I got you.'

As I reflected on her words, there are two stand-out themes recognizable here that resounded throughout the entirety of her story. One was the theme of body-language, touched upon earlier; the other was her genuine concern and care for others. She very clearly communicates her desire to create a better world for herself and for those in her community. As her story will show, she is a person who has great intent on making a difference and genuinely desires to contribute to the world in a positive way by making life easier for others. The wisdom she shares, and we gain, is taken from her own experiences of pain and disappointment. Her compassion and bravery in the face of suffering and distress has been inspirational for me to witness while the candor of her words have echoed in my mind and deeply penetrated my heart, leaving a lasting imprint. Using vivid metaphorical language and description, I was offered a glimpse into the genius of Mary's mind and cognizance and her inner-dialogue. She has an impressive grasp of language, speech, and communication not allowed to fully flourish until her enrollment in adult education. This young

person thinks in pictures and uses symbolism within her vocabulary to paint a vibrant and lucid depiction of experience, thus helping those in communication and co-construction with her to fully visualize and understand her very real lived experience of *story-o-typing*.

I offer Mary's powerful story to you over the pages that follow. As I begin telling her story, I start with the words she conveyed to me in appreciation of the opportunity to speak about her public-school experience, as she states, "It just takes one person like you, to come through to save someone just like me." While I am certainly not posing as a saviour in this instance or am I claiming accolades for my participation in this investigative work, I do want to again highlight that person-centred approaches are foundational to this research project. Inviting voice was a first step in this process and has been integral to the establishment of trust, as Mary's statement above emphasizes.

Collage Description Begins the Telling of Mary's Story

As I listened to Mary on the day of our research discussion, she began by offering me a description of how she constructed and organized her collage. She explained how the left-side of her collage provided a visual of what it "...should have been like to go to public school and/or high school." Thus, the left side reflects the messaging that Mary received from her teachers while she was in junior high in preparation for her high school experience. While the right-side depicts "...what it was actually like," given her experience and account of story. The middle piece is what she "...collected from it all and where I've determined my life to be at this point in time." Given the delineation of sections outlined above, I will present her narrative separately according to left and right hemispheric descriptions, coming back ultimately to the central meaning she has made of her story in the present moment.

Left-Side of Collage: The “Outside-in” Assumptions/Messaging of How School was Supposed to Be

On the day of our meeting, Mary presented her collage after receiving the materials to create it at home over the prior week. As we sat together in-person, she explained her thought process around being *story-o-typed* and how this was shown or displayed over the visual aspect of her collage. She began by discussing the left-side of her collage and how she felt misled by her teachers when she was in middle or junior high school as they painted a very positive picture of high school. She explains:

How in grade eight, they told you it was going to be, and it actually wasn't. So how I was told it was going to be and how I kind of got my perception of what it was supposed to be was ...I'm at a period where I want to step into who I am, and I was always told this is the time to do it.

She went on to explain the hope she felt around entering high school and the opportunities she was advised would be there for her to help her build a foundation for success:

You're going into high school. This is going to be the years to make your life. You can go anywhere, and you can do anything. You can have your say. You have your own future. New possibilities. You're growing. There are services for all. Putting your best foot forward and resilience is key. Well, in saying that, having your say is absolutely not the case, new possibilities are not a thing. You just gotta get the right person to help you along the way. Your words, your thoughts are your own.

While Mary was hopeful as she entered high school, she was soon met with disappointment around her experience of it. As a serious student who wanted to work toward a successful future, she found herself in an adversarial position without the support she had been promised when she left grade eight and entered high school. She names in the above quote how “having your say is

absolutely not the case” and thus her voice was uninvited and unheard. In fact, while in high school she claims she had to be her own support system after feeling as though the support she expected was not forthcoming or offered. She explains her disappointment over the many words and phrases she chose for careful placement on her collage. She opens this aspect of her dialogue as she states:

Consistent dreams, passion, and hard work was always something that I had to tell myself to keep inside of me, even when I was in my darkest points, because consistency is the only thing that's going to help you reach your dreams. And with passion and with hard work, you're definitely gonna be able to reach them someday. You just gotta have to get the right team.

However, as Mary’s narrative continues, she believes she did not benefit from having a team assist her toward the success she expected and yearned for. Moreover, as I read the *outside-in* messaging that Mary initially described she received and expected from her high school experience, it struck me that these very positive messages offered to her in grade eight had likely come from the perspective of those who sat in privilege. All students, regardless of background and value system, had seemingly received the same message, according to Mary.

Taking Down Her Sails: The Reality of High School

It is evident from viewing Mary’s collage and taking in the words she selected to describe her experience that she was a studious and serious student who was looking forward to high school and her future career possibilities; however, as she goes deeper into her description of experience, she begins to lose hope. She exclaims, “But in all reality when you go to high school, it's the complete opposite. Your words and your thoughts are completely invalid.” At this point in the conversation, Mary describes a story filled with rich metaphor as she uses words and

verbal symbolism to fully illustrate a clear picture of what happened to her. Indeed, her love of English literature and writing shines through so consistently throughout her collage and over her narrative. She uses the metaphor of sailing to describe how she felt as a student. She loved sailing but soon lost her passion for it. Connecting this analogy with her loss of interest in school, the wind being taken from her sails, so to speak, as she explains:

Setting sail was kind of my big thing, cause I'm a sailor and that was my ultimate goal when I was a little girl was to go through high school and then become a professional sailor. My ultimate goal. But of course, going into high school and seeing what the real world brings you, it was a little earth shattering. Cause now I have no interest. I just do it as a fun activity, you know. So, setting sail was definitely a big one. When I found that it was like yeah, like they really know how to take down your sails.

As I listened to her words and depiction of her lost interest in school at such a pivotal and young age, I am struck with the imagery used to describe her feelings of disappointment. The wilting of her sails evokes such a strong visual portrayal of the disappointment she felt at that time, where her hopes and dreams began to wane and wither.

Illness, Parental Addictions, Lost Opportunities, and Relationships

Mary's story continues along the vein of frustration as she uses yet another powerful metaphor to describe the disempowerment she felt in high school. She begins by referring to her collage and the words, "time to dream again." This notion creates distress within her. It takes her back to the sailing metaphor she uses as she indicates, it "...goes back to setting sail." She explains, "It's supposed to be your ballpark, but it seems like someone else is playing the game for you ... it's your time to grow with others because really that is what the time is supposed to be." Again, her analogy of a ballpark and someone else playing the game is such a verbally

perceptive and clear way to express how she felt removed from being in control of her high school experience. It truly sets the tone for the rest of her story. She continues from here to explain how her family relationships were severed as a result of her mother being unable to care for because of her addictions to alcohol and to crack cocaine. Mary likewise claims she had health conditions that were cited as being too severe for her to remain at her school, and she was asked to leave and attend school elsewhere.

Once the unfortunate realities of Mary's life became known to the adults around her, being a child, the system stepped in. She ultimately had to move schools given that she was removed from her mother's care. This decision resulted in Mary and her brother being separated, which created much distress and loneliness, as she proclaims:

You know me losing school had me and my brother's relationship fall to pieces cause we were in the same school from K to 8 and then in grade nine, we were supposed to be there together. He was going to graduate the year before me, Like, we had it all set up and then of course my health issues became an issue and they didn't want me at that school. So, it broke our relationship because I didn't get to see him half the time. And to this day, I still haven't recovered the relationship that school has wrecked on me. So, definitely ... 'to grow with others' ... I would definitely say, if I was to choose one person to go back in time and grow with it would have been my brother. I would have brought him to every school that I was in because you know he was my older brother. And he felt, 'okay if they're giving up on my sister, where the hell am I going to end up?' You know, so he graduated and he was so far gone in the army because that what he was told was the only potential he had with his disability, so he was kind of in the same boat. And it would have been nice if we could have again, floated together rather than in our own little boats, you

know? It took a toll, not being able to be with who you're supposed to be with, especially being him. Being the one to take care of me when my mother was incapable of doing so. Mary's story of family trauma and separation is a complicated one. Again, her use of metaphor tangibly describes and depicts what happened to her and how she felt about being separated from her brother. It is a compelling portrayal of the disenfranchisement she felt as she lamented about floating separately from her brother "in their own little boats." The expected progression of her life was abruptly taken off-course given that the relationship most important to her was now detached and broken.

Family Break-down: Community Services Involvement/Parental Emancipation

As Mary continues her story, she describes how Child Protective Services (CPS) became involved when she was 11 years old, and her brother was 13. At that time in her life, she was placed in the care of her grandparents (grandmother) while her brother went to live with his father. She explains, "... then of course school comes along, and everything falls to pieces because once ... I went to a different high school, I had to move in with my grandmother because CPS was involved and didn't want my mother in the situation." This shift in living arrangement uprooted Mary and started her on a path of continued uncertainty which likewise resulted in severed ties with her brother. Mary conveys this in the dialogue below:

Mary: I also had to move to my grandmother's, which made me go to the second school that I ended up at and then there's everything just kept falling apart.

Investigator: But your brother stayed with your mother?

Mary: Uh, no. My brother moved in with his father.

Investigator: Oh, okay.

Mary: Yeah, he left because when I left, because of being kicked out, he left and moved in with his father.

Investigator: Okay and was that at the at the recommendation of the Child Protective Services?

Mary: No, that was all in his free will.

Investigator: Okay, but for you?

Mary: Because of my mother being an alcoholic slash drug user, we had both of our custody signed over to ourselves at 13, so I had custody of myself at 13.

Investigator: You were emancipated?

Mary: Yeah, both of us, uh, because she just was incapable. My grandparents, yes, they are around; however, both my grandmother has been fighting cancer for two and a half years and my grandfather's been through his 23rd round of treatment for cancer. You know he's been fighting it for 47 years. They're not necessarily, at the time, the best adults to have around cause you never know what kind of health issues and such. So yeah, I was emancipated and so was my brother.

Investigator: Was that a relief to leave your mother, or was that a trauma? How was that for you at that time?

Mary: I dropped out of school for a year and a half and, once that happened, it took a lot because growing up she always told me all these things about my father and how he was the bad guy right? And once I was emancipated, I took it upon myself to sign myself over to my father and I said listen, I want to be a part of your life. You don't have to come and see me yet, but I want to be a part of your life. And we end up meeting when I was nine and he disappeared for like a year and a half because of my mother; she was completely off anytime she would see him and she would get abusive like completely write off so he avoided and it took a toll on me as well.

Outside-in Story: Your Mother is Not a Good Mother

I think it is important to say here that even though Mary was in a toxic and unsafe living environment with her mother, she has suffered a big loss by being separated from her mother and displaced from her home. Mary is of course fragile given what has happened. Her life has been disrupted and here begins the trauma of upheaval and separation to the point of disengagement. Mary decides to discontinue her attendance at school for a year and a half. Of course, Mary still loves her mother and conveys a contradiction of emotion about her as she states:

And of course, losing, you know the person that, I call her my rent-a-womb, because you know she gave birth to me ... She was the woman that I am here, like. I am here because of her right? So, it definitely it was heartbreaking to have to leave her and still to this day... You know, I was thinking back, like what if things could have been different? But I mean, at the same time had CPS not come in, I don't think I would be where I am today. But yeah, it definitely broke me. It broke me for a long time.

With Mary disclosing her feeling of brokenness around what happened in this instance, we see the *outside-in story* for Mary take shape where external messaging from those in the system take steps to protect her as they also inadvertently offer her a lens to see her mother through.

Taken from Her Mother and Sibling: “You cannot go home”

This little girl endured the loss of her mother, brother, and biological father. She abruptly became an only child in an adult world, emancipated by age 13. From my professional vantage, the counsellor in me would hope that good supports were arranged for her by community services and by her school. With this in mind, the following dialogue ensued:

Investigator: So, what was the messaging you received from your teachers and CPS? That your mom was troubled?

Mary: That she was off that they'd put her through like an actual urine test and it came back that she had high crack cocaine more than a normal human should have in their body. Like she should have been dead with how much she had.

She went off, I called the police ... police showed up, CPS showed up. And then after the fact, the day after I had to go back to school, the teacher was like, ‘well, we're not going to send you home. You're not allowed to go home.’ And I was like, ‘what do you mean?’ And they said, ‘your mother is on medication and on pills and stuff that she shouldn't be while taking care of someone your age.’ And of course, like I said, at that time I was in denial, so I said, ‘she's not really.’

Investigator: Did you have anyone supporting you at school when that information was delivered or ongoing? Did anyone, a counsellor, or anyone help you?

Mary: No. No. No one. It was the school, when I found out that information, the school that I was in was the school of rich people. It was the school of the fortunate. Like that's the remark they make – you come to this school because your family is made. You come to the school because you're trying to get into an education of the Canadian version of Harvard. You know?

Investigator: Was it a private school?

Mary: It felt like a private school, but it was very much public. This is the high school that all of the big heads go... Like you wouldn't dare to breathe the same air as them because they thought they were privileged. Like that was what the school wanted them to think; 'you're privileged,' and I need you to think that, that way you can go through high school, get somewhere important and I can have that somewhere in my record book [speaking about the adults that run the school].

Imagine being an eleven-year-old child and going to school one day only to learn that you are not allowed to go home. Mary offers the following in confirmation of feeling very much alone as she tries to negotiate what is a very traumatic experience:

Investigator: The message then you received when your mom was troubled was?

Mary: We don't deal with this at the school.

Investigator: We don't deal with this at this school? And then you were asked?

Mary: And then I was asked to leave because of my mental health.

Investigator: Do you think it was about that?

Participant: I think it was a mix of both and I think they just wanted to kind of brush it off and not bring two things up at the table at once.

The *outside-in* messages that Mary describes are insensitive. As a young child receiving this information, from her vantage, the message was, "you are not welcome here," or "move on." I posed some clarifying question to Mary making sure I was hearing her perspective clearly:

Investigator: But they did ask you to leave?

Mary: Yes

Investigator: How did they put that to you?

Mary: The first time that I heard about it was being in the mail. Like I went and checked the mail one morning and it said, 'I regret to inform you, Mary, is no longer invited into the school. We do have other options for her regardless. Wish you the best,' such and such.

Investigator: You're no longer welcome at the school?

Participant: Yeah...

Again, as I read this capture of the research conversation I am puzzled as to why a letter was offered to Mary, as opposed to sitting down with her and her grandparents to discuss any concerns about her enrollment at the school and to advise her on possible next steps.

Streaming Mary into an Alternative School: "It was the school for all the sh!+ shows."

As the dialogue continues, we go deeper into the details of her transition from one school to the next. Mary is left to feel that she is not welcome at her current school; she does not belong in this environment is the message offered to her. And while there has been a move or a shift toward inclusive education in public education systems where all children are supported and educated with their peers within their classroom, regardless of their learning presentation, Mary's story is an exception. I ask the following question of Mary to probe a bit more into what happened to her and why she was asked to leave: "So you're at this point emancipated from your mom. You're living with your grandparents. You receive a letter - you need help, and the response you get is?"

Mary: We can't help you. We don't want to.

Investigator: We don't want to help you move on, yeah? And did they suggest where to move on to?

Mary: Yes, they suggested the learning network that I ended up at in New Brunswick.

Investigator: And was that a public school?

Mary: Yeah, it's a public school. It was literally the school anyone that has a past history on drugs ended up there. Anyone that has an abusive family ended up there. Anyone that was abusive to themselves ended up there. Anyone that was suicidal ended up there. It was 'the' school for all of the shit shows.

What stands out most for me here is the pain that Mary felt as a vulnerable child who is reliant on the world around them to be gentle, and to offer them care and support. But as Mary conveys, she is asked to leave. Mary's language defines how she was made to feel: "It was a school for all the shit shows."

Inside Story: "A rough transition"

As Mary continues telling me her story, she discusses how the alternative school was a better fit for her given the supports available. But she advises that, "it was a very rough transition. It was a lot going into the school and expecting the same things. Like I became close with two teachers there" (she offers two names of staff at the high school she had left). She continues by explaining her initial experience at her new school, "when I got there, and I opened up to people, it was great ... but getting there and having the experience from the last school, being ...well, okay, how do I walk into this one? Definitely not as confident."

No Counselling Support Available

At this point in our discussion, I was curious to learn a bit more about what happened to Mary at her original high school. Why had they asked her to leave? To uncover more of her story, I asked: "Well, you were shown the door ultimately, and just to go back to that school for a moment, was there any school counsellor there at that [previous] school?"

Mary: Yeah [offers a name of the counsellor - she is the wife of another teacher she is close to at the school].

Investigator: Okay, and did she intervene or help you?

Mary: She wasn't allowed to because she was a grade 12 counsellor. They have different years, like different counsellors for different years from 9 to 12 and she was Grade 12 so I wasn't allowed to talk to her ...

Investigator: Okay, what about the other counsellors?

Mary: There wasn't any, you know, there was only one school counsellor and only for grade 12 the majority of the time. There was maybe two [total] and it was the grade 10 counsellor that would come in ... I had an actual like mental health counsellor, so I would have to go to them, and of course I mean, I barely could make food on my table, let alone have a bus to get over the other side of town.

Investigator: So, did anyone tap into you at any point in time? I just want to make sure I'm hearing this story correctly ... did anyone at that school tap into you to help you or to give you some help?

Mary: Besides [the counsellor and her husband] that's it. [The Grade 12 counsellor] was able to do what she could outside of school. So, she was the one who would say, 'okay, you're going to come over to my house on Sunday we're going to make a nice meal for you. Come sit down and eat with us.'

Investigator: Okay, so she wasn't allowed to meet with you in school?

Mary: That was what she was told, but she was doing it on the side.

As Mary continues, she shares how she would have panic attacks in the middle of the night where she would call upon the counsellor and her husband for help. It seemed at the time these two teachers, husband and wife, were her only accessible link to consistent support. Mary explains:

I could call her and in the middle of the night. I remember I was having a panic attack, and she was like, 'you can call me. You can call my husband. You know you can.' So, I called her and she was like, 'okay honey, like what's going down?' She got me calmed down. It was maybe a 20-minute conversation and she's like, 'you good?' I was like, 'I'm good.' She's like, 'okay I'm gonna let you go and I'll see you in school tomorrow.' She goes, 'same time, same place.' That was always her thing, same time, same place. And I was like, 'yep same time same place.'

As a teenager in high school, Mary seems to have a mature understanding of life's complications and, while she seems grateful and thankful for the support of this counsellor, it ultimately brings up pangs of disappointment and let down as she states:

I'd show up the next day and it would be just like a normal like, 'Hi, how you doing?' type thing but once the bell rang she was - she switched off. The teacher became a human again. You know what I mean? But even them too. They say to this day they wish they could go to a different high school, but that's the best that they can do for what they want to do with their careers.

My response to Mary in confirmation of her words was, "so the directive they are working under really isn't a good fit for them. But they're there because it's the best they can do for their profession?" To which she responded, "yes." For Mary, as a young person negotiating a difficult system, one that is purported to be supportive and empowering for children, she is left to feel like an outcast at school as the help offered is denied during school hours and only extended to her in secret.

Outside-in Story Impacts Internal Messaging: Hard to Talk About What Happened

As Mary's continues to tell her story, she laments,

It takes a lot to bring this back up. I want to go to the positive energy one because, I mean, that was the one thing from K to 8, I was always told, if you keep your pazazz in life you'll go far kid. Yeah, and I mean getting to high school, it definitely took away positive energy. You know, we were told that was going to be the majority of our high school experience. You're going to make new friends, you know, positive energies.

I think it is important to mention here that even though Mary suffers by telling her story, a theme that is strongly apparent and recognized is her resiliency and her desire to move toward the

positive. This is how she lives her life today, moving toward the positive, her spirit of optimism remaining intact throughout her life to now. That said, she has obviously come through a lot. Before moving into the positive, we spend a bit more time recounting her high school experience.

As mentioned earlier, Mary has many interests. With a particular fondness for water pursuits, as we previously discussed her interest in sailing, she also admits to being “an avid swimmer.” Mary goes on to explain her experience on the swim team, which ultimately went awry and resulted in her being removed from the team:

I'm a competitive swimmer, so the swimming team was ultimately my goal, you know.

But with my mental health being how it was, of course my grades weren't staying up, so I got booted off of the swim team. So then there goes my biggest positive vibe - knowing

I'm doing something I'm good at, being taken from it, that was kind of earth shattering.

Outside-in Message: “You're too much of a liability”

As I listened to Mary describe her disappointment and how she felt penalized and prevented from participating on the swim team, my mind went immediately to the idea of how educational stratification plays out in schools. There are countless students who, for whatever reason, are not able to engage as the system deems appropriate, who feel punished when pulled from extracurricular interests. My response to Mary, leading us deeper into her story was, “You were on the swim team, successful in that. That was a positive thing for you. But you mentioned your mental health - was there other stuff coming in for you?” With this question Mary explains how she had mental and physical symptoms of stress and trauma:

Well with my mental health, like I said, I fainted. I had gotten in a fight with my coach right before swimming and I got into the pool and my body shut off and I almost drown.

By the time they pumped all the fluid out of my lungs, my [estranged] mother at the time, she showed up and she was like, 'you're no longer on this team blah blah blah.' And I got it into the coach's head that I didn't have the right to be on the team with the disorders I had. And he talked to the principal, and sure enough, the principal's like yeah, she shouldn't be on your team. She's too much of a liability.

Trauma Producing Schools

According to Mary, she was a liability. Mary offers, "I got it into the coach's head that I didn't have the right to be on the team with the disorders I had." As we continued our conversation, I asked Mary if she knew why she was fainting. Was there a medical condition causing her to faint? At that time, she was not aware of what was causing her health issue. She did, however, find out three and a half years later what was plaguing her, with the help of a cardiologist. She explains:

So my blood pressure is way too low for my age and my white blood cell count's way too high for my age. So when my white blood cell count and my blood pressure hit together, I drop with my blood pressure and then just completely shut off. And when I come to, I'm completely unaware of what's going on. I have absolutely no clue. It's kind of like at first I thought it was seizures because, when I did wake up, I was completely dazed and confused freaking out like everyone get away from me type thing right. And 125 tests later... finally it just took one doctor, it took a heart doctor to tell me everything and end up figuring it out trying to go back to the school. And they [the school] said, 'well, you're still a liability because you still have it. It doesn't matter if you know what it is, you're still a liability.' It's like, 'Well, when am I not a liability? When I'm perfectly fine?' Because I can guarantee, even all these high-class people in here you know, you're

human. You're human, you have stress. If you're human, you have something; you have depression. You know, like, it's natural.

Mary felt very much alone in her negotiation of the school system. Another school was undoubtedly a better option for her given the *story-o-typing* and judgement placed upon her. Mary, being the understanding person that she was and still is, likewise understood that another school may be better equipped to assist her, as she discusses:

It kind of felt like they were just passing me on to somebody that was a little more equipped, which I mean, I do get it like the fainting in the pool ... Okay, I do understand. I was about ready to take myself off of the team knowing that, okay, I could put myself or somebody else in jeopardy. You know, I'm not the only one swimming in a pool. And that's always been a thing for me, right? But it was the fact that they took it upon themselves to make my decision for me. You know, kicking me off the team and such, so it definitely felt like they were just trying to pass it along to somebody else to deal with. But at the same time, they could have been passing it along to somebody that could have properly dealt with me. But again, I got to that school and only had two people [in reference to the school counsellor and her husband] out of 100 faculty you know?

Outside-in Message: Asked to Leave School/Exclusion

In Mary's case, the suggestion of moving to an alternative school caused her much pain and anguish. Mary conveys this as she explains:

Yeah, because the only help I got was when they told me that it was a liability and that I couldn't be at the school anymore. That was the only help they gave me, was giving me that [alternative] schools information. And at the time, the school ...it didn't have a good

rep. Like I said, it's where all the bad kids ended up. If you had a bad history, you ended up at the school, right? So, it was really hard for me to accept that I'm ending up there because of my mental health. It was like, I'm doing everything properly on my end, and of course I got to the second school, and what did I do? I went off on percocets ...

I couldn't get out of bed with 25 percocets in my f***** system. Like it was absolutely brutal, and it's because I was just exposed and you know, was double exposed. I was exposed to begin with [referring to her mother] seeing her high. Seeing her hit the crack pipe, like it was double exposure.

Exposure to Drugs at Alternative School

Mary was a vulnerable student to begin with and the decision to have her attend an alternative school compounded her situation. This sort of streaming placed her with other students who were also vulnerable and “at-risk.” Many of them were also using substances. To flesh out her experience a bit more around this I asked her to comment further on what provoked her taking percocets. She explained:

That is the lowest day, like the lowest I've felt, ever. You know I've lost people I love, and I still haven't felt as low as I did in high school. Like that was my low point.

And to be exposed to, you know, obviously I have addiction in my family, you know.

My mother is highly addicted. My father used to be an alcoholic. Not anymore, he has recovered, but again, addiction. It's in my blood, right? So I did know, you know, it started with drinking for me and I did know if I was to ever touch a pill it's probably gonna be really hard for me to get off of it.

Feeling Mary's sadness and perhaps her sense of discomfort in discussing the topic of her drug use, I veered back to a safer question by asking, “Did you have any friends that you left behind

from the high school?” In asking this, I wanted to know if she had supportive friends and connections that would be positive or sustaining for her through her difficult transition. The following conversation unfolded as she explained her reasoning for cutting off her friendships:

Mary: Um, I did, but I mean, when I left the first high school, it was kind of like, if the teachers think I'm a liability, I don't want to bring these people into it. So I just left them be. I just went AWOL ... You know, I ran into them at the mall, and they're like, 'where have you been?' And it's like, I'm sorry, you know. Like yeah, it just, I just had to drop them and I still feel crappy about it, but ...

Investigator: It's not your fault. It sounds like you had to survive that really ...it sounds traumatic. Like a negative experience.

Participant: I don't want to bring someone into my life just for them to see that, you know. Just for them to get that impression. Like just because they're treating me like this doesn't mean they're going to treat you like that. And I don't want you getting that impression.

As I reflect on Mary's words now, it is so impressive how at her young age and being so vulnerable, she was able to put others before herself. She wants the best for her friends, despite being so fragile and wounded. Indeed, the protection and care she selflessly extends to her friends is truly admirable and a quality that consistently shines through her story. It speaks to her strengths of compassion and her care for others. It strikes me how these types of qualities, those that speak to empathy, genuine strength, and personal authenticity, are often traits and abilities that the school system misses because they are not tied to the measurement of academic success.

Inside Message: “Battered and Bruised”

As I press forward to accompany Mary in the deepening of her story, I ask, “So what emotion came up for you with all of that? Like if you could name it, what kind of hung over you at that point in your life?” She explained:

I definitely ... I want to say metaphorically, battered and bruised. Like I felt like I'd been put through the wringer. And I had no choice but to kick everyone from my life.

You know, when I left Saint John to go down to PEI before coming here, I didn't tell my family. I didn't even tell my grandparents. I didn't tell nobody. I just got up and I left. Again, Like Montreal ... just got up and left. But that time, I was stupid and went to PEI - I went back to my mother. And you know, living with her, it's obviously living under her roof. So you know, like I'm a respectful human. Like I do have my boundaries, but I'm respectful. If I'm living in your house... I respect the rules you're making. Like I am a very respectful person. But yeah, it was definitely hard knowing I was leaving everyone that ever supported me behind just because of ... I want to say some stupid feelings, but really now that I'm looking back at it some stupid feelings that somebody else is making me feel. You know, I wish - I wish I could look back at younger me and go, 'keep those friends because it's not you. They're not the issue.'

Inside Message: “It felt like it was my fault”

From her adult vantage, Mary is feeling much regret about her response to what happened to her, but it is always easy to criticize ourselves in the wisdom of hindsight. It is the criticism that she received at her school, however, that led to her placing blame on herself, as children often do when something goes wrong – it is a common phenomenon of youth. Mary explains the heaviness she felt carrying the blame and shame of being a problem as she expresses:

When you're going through it, it's like, it's me. It's all me, like I'm, I genuinely felt like it was me; everything that went wrong in the world. It made me feel useless. It felt like it was my fault. The reality that you know you woke up and you go, okay, well, let's go see how many things can be my fault today ...which is kind of the definition of waking up

and it makes it hard. Yeah, you know, get out of bed. Your blanket feels 50 pounds heavier than it should and you just feel cold internally.

Mary did not have the motivation to learn feeling “useless.” Perhaps anyone who has faced this level of adversity would feel exactly as Mary has described. She was overtaken with a weariness and heavy feeling, or as she communicates, “feeling cold internally.”

Outside-in Message Creates Trust Issues: Actions Speak Loudly

Given that Mary felt depreciated and devalued at her school, she goes on to explain how her trust has been broken. We hear again how she evaluates her environment instinctively through an appraisal of body language, as she states:

If I don't trust you, I'm not going to open up the vulnerable parts of me cause, I know how it feels to have those shattered. Again, one teacher to 10 teachers to 20 teachers and then you just feel like the whole world after ... you've got five people that are supposed to be behind your back and you see there is a complete opposite. Okay, well how am I supposed to? You know body language is such a big thing for me now. How am I supposed to believe somebody if I can't actually believe their words? Yeah, cause it's the last thing - I have the world biggest trust issues now, and I forever will. And it's something that I'm completely confident I am okay with living with because at the end of the day, if I don't trust you, I'm not going to open up the vulnerable parts of me. Cause, I know how it feels to have those shattered. And I'm definitely not going to go back to having those shattered, you know.

As I listened to Mary's words on the day of our conversation, my visceral response to her was:

So, you're left with really having, from all of that, broken trust. And then how do you rebuild that? You know going forward, it's difficult. And you were, you know, the whole

idea of this is how have you been *story-o-typed* or stereotyped? You're saying from one teacher to 20 teachers, like that *story-o-typing*, they all kind of bought into that, you know problemed mother, problemed child, right? You can't keep her here because?

Outside-in Message of Story-o-typing: “I am not my mother”

To which Mary responded with:

Because we don't know what to expect from her, you know. And then they, it kind of felt like they didn't know - they were sitting back and waiting for me to go off on drugs like my mother, just so they could have kind of kicked me out. Like that's how it felt, like they were just sitting back and watching me from a corner and waiting until I messed up somewhere and then you know, sure enough when that didn't happen it went straight to my health.

Mary believes that when she did not act out at school, they used the excuse of her fainting to ask her to leave. I posed the following question to get clarification on her point of view, “So, you felt then that they were like waiting on you to kind of, for lack of a better way of putting it, act out or be a problem? Be a discipline issue?”

Mary: Or show up to school high or show up to school drunk.

Investigator: Which you never did.

Mary: Never, never. Like and that was my biggest thing going through high school, before I actually got like addicted ... my biggest thing is I don't want to look like my mother. And even when I was addicted, I would cry myself to sleep going, ‘I am my mother right now, like this is literally what she does on a day-to-day. And I'm doing it now too,’ right.

Investigator: So, they looked at your mother and they said, that is you - that was the *story-o-typing*?

Mary: Yeah, you're a product of where you've come from.

Investigator: They think that you, because you're in proximity ... you're genetically tied to your mom, then that's going to ultimately be your definition as well?

Mary: That's it! Like that's genuinely how it felt. It was like, I've seen and I've met your mother and I see and know who you're going to be. Well, little do you know - here I am! I am the cleanest out of everyone I have ever gone to school with. I am the only one that's not currently off on drugs. I'm the only one that's not drinking my life to the bottom of the bottle. And I'm the only one that's actually pursuing finishing school.

Mary's determination and her desire to succeed brought her to an adult learning program in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, where she is thriving and on a path to her dream of becoming a police officer. Despite the *story-o-typing*, "you are your mother," she received at her high school, she has risen above the judgements and opinions placed upon her. Eager to access her strengths and to approach a more positive and empowering narrative that describes her truth and the reality of today, I posed the following question(s): "You had wanted to achieve success; you had a lot of interests, right? What was your favorite subject?"

My ultimate favorite subject is English. All things English. And of course, that was the one teacher where she was just an absolute jerk. There was one class I remember - I always sat at the back of the class cause I just hated everyone looking at me and I needed to watch everything around me and sat at the back of the class, and she goes, 'Mary, are you going to give us an answer?' And I gave the answer, and she goes, 'no, that's wrong. You should probably study some more' and then goes back over. And I'm like, I went straight to the principal's office. I was like, she does not have the right to call me out like that in front of the entire class. And of course, the principal was like, 'she's your teacher.'

When Mary rightly goes to complain about her treatment, her voice is once again ignored and dismissed by the school principal. Another example of the marginalization Mary received from the high school she attended.

Inside-out Message: Strong Academically

As our conversation continued, I responded to Mary by saying, “So, someone is calling you out and you're trying to build confidence and you like the subject; Did she know you liked the subject?” To which Mary replied:

She knew I was alone. I was the first one to ever have anything done. It would be like, you had four and a half weeks to finish this essay - it would be a week and a half and I would be done. Every rough copy, every like grammar check, like English ... I'm the best at math, so says the teachers. But English is something that I feel passionate about. Kind of like poetry and such. It's the one language that will never let you down. Words will never let you down.

Outside-in Message: Actions Speak Louder than Words; Other Students Treated Differently/Better

Indeed, Mary's use of language, metaphor, and broad vocabulary are evidence of her love of the English language, which is established throughout her story and her collage. I point this out to her by saying, “And then this [pointing to her collage] is an exhibit of this” [meaning her love of language and words]. To which Mary replied, “Yeah, a very pure exhibit of it. You could have just one word on a sheet of paper, and you can make a thousand things out of it.” Mary is indeed gifted in language and communication; however, despite Mary's ultimate academic conquest and current success in school, she still hangs on to her past and the damage done. She expounds on her previous high school setbacks as she expresses, “Yeah, meanwhile I'm at the other side of class and I'm watching this teacher go beyond for this one student, you know I mean? To which I respond, “So you're watching them interact differently with someone else?” Mary agrees and explains:

Yeah, this exact teacher and then the teacher comes up to me and it's like, the person just goes cold. So, like what kind of outlook do you have on life? And I am also the type of person, you know, someone comes up to me and they're disrespectful and I have no clue who they are - they could be going through a lot themselves. They could be going through a lot at home. That is not my place to judge.

So, I don't get why a teacher would come up to me and just go cold. It's not your right to make assumptions on what's going on in my life. It's not your right to make assumptions on what I'm going to do with my life. Because I mean, here I am [referring to her adult education program] ... and they [referring to her public school teachers/principal] are the last people on my f***** mind, respectfully.

As Mary expresses her anger and frustration at her English teacher and her school, her maturity and care demonstrate the ideologies of inclusive education as she reminds us how placing judgement on others, when we don't know their story or why they behave as they do, can be damaging and detrimental to the person on the receiving end. She makes this point so astutely as she recognizes that children, and adults alike, carry various levels of trauma with them and sometimes these negative experiences can impact behavior. Mary speaks to this point well when she says, "it's not your right to make assumptions."

Outside-in Message: Family Violence; Police did not Intervene

In my own attempt to demonstrate and create empowering and strengths-based research conversations, my aim at this point in my conversation with Mary is to shift our discourse toward the positive as I suggest, "There's, you know, lots of messaging that happens to people in school, and if it's negative messaging and it impacted you at the time - maybe it's propelling you forward now?" In hindsight, as I ask this question, perhaps it seems too optimistic or perhaps it negates

the truth of Mary's lived experience. I regret the prematurity of the positive question. Obviously, the trauma of what happened to Mary is still fresh and very tangible and real. To veer toward the positive is to dismiss her trauma. To offer her a platform for authentic expression is the intention of this work. She wants to air her grievances, as she clarifies:

Mary: Yeah, it's absolutely - yeah cause, I mean, it even felt like, you know, the Saint John police force was against me. Because I had called the police one time and they showed up and [my mother] had completely convinced the police officer that I started the physical altercation between me and my mother. And that's how it began – blah, blah, blah, blah. And she was like, 'no don't press charges' or whatever.

In all reality, she got high and she came after me. I defended myself and she end up looking worse. So, when the police showed up, they obviously assumed I was the initiator.

Investigator: But you were - How old were you then?

Mary: I was eight.

Investigator: You were eight?

Mary: And then they left. They had believed her - that I started to beat her, yeah.

Investigator: But you're a little girl. Okay.

Mary: So, it felt again, it felt like I was alone because the mother had spoken up. The mother is like, 'don't press charges against her, she's the one that started it, but don't press charges,' you know. So they were like, 'okay, well you girls just calm down,' and carried on their way, you know.

Investigator: Did they report it to child protection?

Mary: No. No, because the mother said that everything was in the clear, you know? And of course, my mother, being my mother - I'm still, like to this day; I know how to fight my battles, but I'm terrified of her. Like when it comes to her fist coming in contact with my face, absolutely terrified. I would crawl into a ball every time when it comes to someone coming up to me and confronting me about it – I always shut down.

I was going, 'no, she never hit me.' No to this, no to that, and at the time I really regret saying all of those, you know. I wish I would have looked at the police officer and said, 'but she started it and I don't want to be here right now,' you know. But again, here I am. I want to be a police officer.

Investigator: And you it sounds like you'd be tuned into like the real dynamic [speaking to her response that she wants to be a police officer.]

Mary: The real, the reality to the dark side of the world, you know, yeah. I know that there is a very dark side to the world, but it doesn't have to be all dark. It's just, people are making it seem like it's the only choice for these people. That's it.

Investigator: Did you feel that in the school system?

Mary: I was on the dark list and everyone else was on the on the heaven-sent list and this was the list to help.

Once again, Mary speaks to the multiple levels of trauma she confronted at the hand of her mother, compounded by the lack of support offered to her by the justice system who seemingly missed an opportunity to intervene in this instance.

Outside-in/Inside Message: Themes of Spirituality; “I baptized myself at 13”

As Mary searches for hope and help and does not find an abundance of it in the physical world, she looks to God for an intervention. She explains how this decision came to her after unsuccessful attempts at suicide. She acknowledges,

I baptized myself at 13, Pentecost. And of course, leaving high school, it made me believe well, you know, if God has a plan for everyone, then what the hell was my plan then? Because, you know, each time I tried to kill myself, it was like, I know I don't get what the whole plan is here. So, it definitely made me lose belief for a long time; where I was like, there's no way he's putting me through this knowingly, you know. Yeah, while I'm on the other end bleeding, you know ...

As I listened to Mary's reasoning and the painful heartbreak of a young girl brought to attempts at suicide, I invited her to comment further about her inner world, to understand more of her experience and her spiritual journey. I asked, “So, you at 13 baptized yourself? What ultimately

led you to that decision on that particular day?" To which she responded with the following detailed account:

So, the ultimate decision had come - I lived at the top of the hill and down my back hill, like just like my backyard hill, there was a church right there and they were doing a group activity one day. I was having a really, really, really bad day and I needed to get away from [my mother]. So, I left the house and went down the back way because [my mother] is horrible with hills when she's high, so she could never chase me down the hill. So, I went down the hill and sure enough they were playing some activity outside. It was like group soccer or something like that and they're like, 'hey, do you want to come in and play?' And at that second, I really, really needed it. So, I was like, 'yeah, you know what, I'm gonna.' So I took off my book bag and I took everything off and I went and started playing with them and they brought me in. And a couple girls asked me what was going on and I told them. And we prayed together and I go, 'so like, do I have to be from birth a believer in order to be baptized?' And they said, 'God, no, you can do as you please. You can do one baptism and a week later go and redo it, if you so please, like that's just how it goes.' I was, 'I'd like to talk to the pastor.' Pastor [name redacted] came up to me and was like, 'How may I help you dear?' And I'm like, 'I'd like to baptize myself tonight.' And he was like, 'Okay, I'll see you tonight at 6:00 o'clock.' 'That sounds good.'

So, the service, just a normal Sunday service, happened and I baptized myself and my grandparents showed up and [my mother] showed up at the end of it and goes, 'I never gave you permission to come and do this.' And I thought a second - that's when I realized, she thought she had control over my life. And at that second, that's when I

realized why I've been emancipated almost a year and a half previous to this. It was like, you have no say in it. Like my grandparents are here, for crying out loud. One of my grandparents is all out atheist, and she showed up. You know, like shut up. Sure, keep your mouth shut. And sure enough, she [Mary's mother] showed up and she goes, 'I never gave you permission to do this. We're leaving now,' trying to grab me by the arm. And at that second, I go, 'No, actually this isn't your choice.' And I turned around and guess what I did? I went and rebaptized myself right in front of her. But then of course, when it came to going through the rest of my life, it was like, well, putting my everything into something where it seems like He's not really fighting as hard for me... you know at the time.

Wanting confirmation from Mary on who she was referring to, I asked, "Who was that again?"

She clarified,

God. Like it just seemed like He was putting me through too much, where it just didn't make sense to my brain. Like, He loves you. He protects you. He only puts you through what you have to go through to learn your lessons in life. Okay, I get that. But what the heck? You know, like at the time, I'm like, I feel at my lowest. Like consistently just suicidal thoughts. Like all the time. And it makes you wonder, like is there even anyone I'm praying to, you know?

Abandonment at Christmas

In response to Mary's pondering her relationship with God, I responded by saying, "But you were seeking something, right? Did that help you ultimately, to be baptized? Did you feel that there was support from God?" To which Mary responded with a partial yes, but then detailed more disappointment and distress within her maternal relationship. She explains,

It did for a while there, it did. But then things just increasingly just kept getting worse; [my mother] ran away on Christmas Eve, went to PEI with her druggie boyfriend who she's no longer with, but ran away Christmas Eve. I woke up Christmas morning, the house was empty. It was just me and my dog, and they were gone ...

And I had the nerve to go over to her house knowing the boyfriend is abusive, knowing the boyfriend is off on needles. I went over to her house for Christmas Eve out of respect for her, cause she asked me to. I'm not a cold-hearted woman. I really am not. And I did, and sure enough, what did I wake up to? An empty house, just me and my dog.

That was it. And a note saying, 'I won't be back.' And she never returned.

I had to sell the apartment myself. I had to sell every furniture item I had.

Inside-out Message: “With resilience comes a lot of heartbreak”

Knowing that Mary was young, I asked for clarification on her age and more dialogue ensued that painted a fuller picture of this excruciating time in her life. I responded to Mary's portrayal of her Christmas alone by asking:

Investigator: And how old were you?

Mary: At that time, I was only 14. You know?

Investigator: You had to grow up very quickly. You had to be an adult at a very young age.

Mary: I guess it was for a reason.

Investigator: Well, I mean you've come out of it obviously well; you're resilient.

Participant: With resilience comes a lot of heartbreak, a lot. There's not one person in this world that had to be resilient and say, I was happy for every second of it. No, no, when you're resilient, you're being resilient because you're at your weakest point.

Investigator: What choice do you have really? Yeah, that's true. That's very true.

As I heard Mary speak her truth on this day, and as I tried to suggest that she was strong, I felt Mary gently guide me to the reality of her situation. Indeed, she did not choose her negative experience and she had no choice but to be resilient. It was survival for her and often she was barely hanging on.

Inside Message: Meditation was Grounding; “To keep in contact with myself”

The wisdom Mary has acquired over her young life has come through harsh circumstances. And while time and distance has given her perspective and strength, I ache for the young girl who had to endure such pain. To Mary’s point, resilience has brought her a lot of heartbreak. How did she sustain and survive the heartbreak? Mary conveys she was in survival mode, searching for connection, support and advice. For someone to see her and offer her a helping hand. What child in these drastic circumstances could easily negotiate learning and being in school? It is remarkable to me and a testament to Mary’s will that she was able to engage in school at all during this period of her life. As our conversation continued, I asked, “So what do you think? Was it God that ultimately got you through all of that, or was it ... what do you think that was?” She responded:

Honestly, it was meditation for me. Because after I kind of had given up on God there for a while and after that I was like, okay, well I need something to bring my nerves down, because that was the ultimate goal, you know. Going to him, that was the ultimate goal was to feel just a little bit at ease – a little bit in somebody’s capable hands for a second, you know. And it didn't seem to change, you know. So ultimately, I started to meditate and I think it was four and a half months after meditating, and I was finally able to take myself off of my antidepressant. So that was kind of like my biggest first step, you know. And that's ultimately, like to this day, before school every morning before getting out of

the car, I'm sitting there and meditating. Like I don't give a crap who's around me. My doors are locked in the car and my doors are locked at the house – I'm sitting there and I'm meditating because at the end of the day, like I said, I am the only me I'm going to get. And in order to keep me, me, I have to keep in contact with myself. You know, so if I let myself slip away then it's like, okay rest - we need to have a good hour meditation, you know, just completely out of body experience.

Mary found strength within herself. Her meditative practice inspiring and sustaining, while it speaks to her fortitude, courage, maturity, and determination to overcome her misery and misfortune as she reaches for hope and peace and finds it within herself. It also speaks to the validity of meditation as a relaxation tool. For many students the invitation or opportunity to quiet their mind in a chaotic world can be intensely soothing and healing. I respond to Mary's open-minded and enlightened coping strategy with, "That's amazing - it taps into your own wisdom." To which she responded, "It does a lot of help. Yeah, just brings me back down to earth."

Outside-in/Inside Message: Diverse Perspectives Expand the Mind and Horizons

As Mary continued with her discussion of her collage, she brought me to a sentence on her collage that was "...talking about the school system in Ghana." She advised me that the sentence she found, and attached to her piece, was taken from a paragraph that she read in a magazine that interested her. She advised the article,

... really interested me so I read the entire thing before cutting this out and it's about education and how it's like the one and only thing everyone has in life, you know? Everyone's guaranteed ... the right to go and accept an education, you know. In Canada it's illegal not to be going to school when you're enrolled, you know. So, it says

‘the reality is that these young people only have the school as a means of context for meeting, engaging with others and having fun.’ And that's what they made me think, you know. And that's genuinely how I felt going into high school. You don't learn things of the world without having complete strangers around, you know ... you can't learn things about different ethnicities and such without having them around you. You know what I mean? So, in saying that, engaging with others would be kind of the biggest thing in helping people learn. Context for meeting, you know. People meeting new people, that's how you become social. You don't meet new people on a day-to-day and you don't feel welcomed on a day-to-day, you're going to shut yourself out. You're going to be introverted, and chances are you're going to become very depressed...

So impressively, astutely, and instinctively, Mary describes how we develop through socialization and social interactions; through conversation and dialogue, and an embrace of others, we expand ourselves. In essence, we need one another. From her lived experience, she understands the consequences of being isolated and the toll it takes, as she states, “...if you don't feel welcomed every day, you're going to shut yourself out ... you're going to become very depressed.” To deny others their humanity, we deny ourselves of the opportunity to expand our consciousness and to create a world that offers acceptance and compassion. Hearing and learning about cultural nuances and perspectives is valid and valuable, as Mary conveys. By creating this type of authentic context for liberated learning we individually and collectively emancipate ourselves from historical truths in acknowledgement of personal experiences and how this can inform and transform the collective consciousness.

Outside-in Message: Shoved in the Corner; “This whole school doesn't make me feel like I'm present”

In response to Mary's advice, I asked, “So that was your expectation? That openness to learning? She states, “It was kind of more of a ... it was a means to show high schoolers that not everything is as it seems, you know. You could be taught one thing, and it's going to be the very opposite.” Mary goes on to explain how the messaging she received about entering high school was misleading and inaccurate for her:

We were taught going into grade nine to let your guard down, make some new friends, become yourself. The ultimate thing that ended up happening when you went into grade nine; You would show up, you'd go, okay, I feel like I'm present. I know that I'm present. But this whole school doesn't make me feel like I'm present. All in all, that was the message; you could be as present as you possibly could be, you have the perfect attendance, but if you or somebody didn't have it made, you know, you didn't have your life somewhat on a silver platter, you were that person just shoved in the corner that didn't get the means to meet people and to become outgoing with all your friends and such. You know, you didn't have that chance to have fun because you were too busy wondering what the heck is going to happen next.

Mary's story describes her lived experience of judgement and *story-o-typing* that comes from those who make up the system (often by those who reside in privilege). She literally felt pushed to the margins at her community school which ultimately led to her being streamed into an alternative school.

Outside-in Message: Exclusion; You're not Welcome, You're not Trusted

Pressing for more of Mary's story, I offered, "So you didn't feel safe?" To which she agreed by saying:

Yeah, didn't feel safe. Didn't feel welcome. Didn't feel as if people could trust me.

You know, I gave no reason to anybody not to trust me, and it felt that way. It felt like I had given them the whole world not to trust me; Like I had burned down your house and took everything you owned with it, like that type of untrustworthy feeling.

Again, Mary's metaphorical communication style allows for us to grasp the depth of pain she is left to feel given the isolation and fear she felt when attending her community high school. Her words communicate a drastic and severe sort of messaging that contrasted Mary's initial openness to high school as she conveys how she "let my walls down" only to be met with judgement and rejection. Mary goes on to discuss the cues she picked up on as she revisits the theme of body-language and non-verbal cues she received from her school environment. She shares:

Yeah, yeah ... and that's the thing about humans, words can have up to six lies into them. But a person's facial expressions will never lie to you; someone's body language will never lie to you, you know. I found a couple of things that definitely stood out to me ... *to sum up the entire collage* really was the reality of them telling you, you're not alone, and then the reality of it actually being is, *you are alone*. That's just how it feels, you know? Yeah, and definitely, you know, moving over to how it actually felt, there was conflict, like there was conflict ... whether it was conflict at home because you weren't doing good in school or school because you weren't doing good at home ...or maybe

none of the above. Maybe at times you just were having mental conflicts ... You know nothing to do with home or school. That's just how it was, right? A lot of conflict.

Inside Messages: On the Blue Side of the Room; “Feeling blue ... why me?”

Mary explains more of the conflict she experienced by referencing her collage. She points to the words, “into the blue” and the meaning this particular expression held for her. Her use of language paints a picture for us given her use of colours which tangibly brings to life the feelings and emotions she felt at this vulnerable point in her life. She articulates:

‘Into the blue,’ you know it definitely, you know, if you weren't in the black side of the room you were in the blue side of the room. You never felt like you were in that happy yellow phase where everyone was coming to school all excited, you know, like you were getting up and you were like, do I really have to go and do this today?

Investigator: So, like a depressive kind of feeling?

Mary: Yeah, like literally just feeling blue. Yeah, yeah yeah, ‘why me?’ That was a reoccurring question. And I mean, still to this day, I will forever look back and I will always say you know, why didn't? Why was I the one out of hundreds? You know? And I know, I'm not alone, but it sure as hell felt like I was. Wondering why, I mean, you know why? Why did my life have to be the one to go into a spiral?

Mary's dialogue to now references feelings of isolation, depression, being alone, and a lack of support. She felt unsafe in her environment with the adults around her. Mary is unaware of any intervention, other than her being referred to an alternative school. Yet, she had a willingness and a desire to engage and to achieve success at her community school. Mary describes suffering to the point of feeling like she had no other option but to attempt suicide as an escape.

Inside Messages: “I’d go to sleep and I’d think of negative thoughts”

As Mary continues with her story and dialogue, she revisits again how the messaging received in school has impacted her and has left a lasting negative impression. I would like to point out the significance of her repeated messages and her rumination on negative thoughts and experiences pertaining to her high school experience. Mary’s dialogue in this regard communicates the intense suffering she endured as she processes and ruminates on the damage done to her as a child and that follows her still into adulthood. She references the words on her collage, “prepare to pivot” as she explains how she went from a hopeful student entering high school to someone who is filled with self-doubt and negative thoughts. She expresses:

It is the brutal reality, the bull crap they like to feed you about going into high school. When you go into high school, the one thing I would tell somebody leaving Grade eight to this day is prepare for your life to pivot. You are going to have an eye-opening experience, no matter if you're straight A's or D's. It does not matter, you are going to have an eye-opening experience regardless of your at home situation, your mental health, regardless of your school situation, you know? Prepare to pivot when you go to high school. Take a big pivot as well you know, negative. Negative images inside of my head, you know, teachers. I’d go to sleep and I’d think of negative thoughts. Be it a teacher at the corner of the room calling me out in front of the entire class, you know. Like just constant reminders of all these negative things that were happening in real life, you know. Negative emotions.

Inside-out Messaging: Resilience found after high school; “Life isn’t as bad as it seemed”

For Mary, however, one key theme that is apparent throughout her story is that of resilience. She attributes her resilience to moving away from high school and taking control of her feelings, as she reveals,

...it took me a while after getting away from high school ... for me to realize life isn't as bad as it seemed ... I can make it how I want it; I can make it as bad as I want it, or I can make it as good as I want it ... like it's in my control.

As Mary continues, however, she diverges back to what happened to her in high school and those lingering feelings of hopelessness. She indicates that her grades slipped from A's to C's and D's and, as her grades slipped, so did her engagement in school. Indeed, apathy crept in as she recalls:

When you get into high school chances are you're gonna feel like you have nothing to lose. Like you're gonna feel like you're there and you're doing it all for nothing, like you're just literally have nothing to lose, right. And again, like that it doesn't even just say to the people that have mental health issues or have at home situations, you know – you could get in and you could have been doing straight A's for grading. You go to Grade nine and you know you're getting D's and C's and such, and you feel like you have nothing to lose; like you've already lost everything. Like, there's literally nothing else for me to lose, so why am I even here, right?

Ran Away from Home, Relying on Herself

Hearing Mary express her feelings of disinterest and indifference toward the school system, she opens to describe her decision to leave high school for a year and a half. She describes her decision to run away from home as she discloses:

It was a year and a half I ran away from home. I ended up in Montreal. I just got on a bus and just didn't stop. I ended up in Montreal and I stayed up there for four and a half months with my cousin and we just lived our best life. We just did anything and everything that we could possibly afford to do, you know. I went skydiving for the first

time and like incredible things. And I came back, and I felt rejuvenated and everything was good. And from that day on, I choose what kind of relationship I have with my mother now, and that's why if I talk about it, you'll find me calling her [mother's first name redacted]. [Mother's first name] is her name, and that's because the best way to tell your brain that you don't have to depend on a relationship with this human is just by looking at them as if they're another stranger on the street.

So if I call her [by her first name] then that's me cutting off that emotion. That's me cutting off that she is my mother and I need to, you know, she's put me through hell. And I would never do the same to her So, it's a on a very touch basis, like she doesn't have my cell phone number, and the school was told if she's ever to call, "Sorry we can't give you any information." I was getting kicked out of school. Well, she didn't care because she was getting high, you know. Like she gave no craps in the world where I was. I was on the streets for four and a half months sleeping on bench to bench. She gave no craps. She was home getting high. You know, she was under a roof.

With no support from her mother and with doubts and misgivings around the support offered by the school system or other systems, such as Child Protective Services, Mary chose to run away. Feeling like she was a burden, Mary's identity as a person was in jeopardy. Negativity was all around her which pushed her to choose homelessness in that moment. Running to perhaps relieve the distress and disillusionment with her surroundings. She needed to find a way to illuminate her future. As I listened to Mary recount her experience on the streets, I think about what brought her to this decision to leave her familiar surroundings; how bad must it have been for her to decide the street held more peace or promise for her than remaining in school? Saddened at her

disclosure, I responded with, “How did you survive that? You obviously are strong, but how did you?” To which she conveyed:

Barely, barely, yeah, barely, yeah. A lot of discovering myself. The true definition of, you don't have anybody but yourself, that's very, very true. Like at the end of the day you could have four hundred family members and none of them actually feel like blood, and you could have a stranger next to who feels the closest, you know? Hope is hard work [referring to collage] I loved that when I found that because hope is a lot of hard work. So yeah, I definitely learned to thrive off of myself.

Such wisdom coming from a young person is impressive, and that is what Mary is, an incredibly impressive young person who wanted something better.

Inside-out Message: “Hope is Hard Work”

Mary's resilience as a young person is not only remarkable in her case, but it is a testament to the human will to reach for hope, even during bleak times. Again, Mary's drive and tenacity shines through over her difficulties as she demonstrates great strength of will. She strives for success and works hard to find hope. Mary then moves on to discuss how the resentment she felt and feels toward her mother propelled her forward to very deliberately pursue her own happiness and positive relationships. Mary proclaims:

You know, waking up and going okay, I'm not doing this for her, I'm doing it against her. I'm doing it because she doesn't want to see me happy, you know. I'm going to bring in a happier relationship [talking about her current relationship with her now fiancée]; She just proposed, and I told her [meaning her mother] and she was, ‘Oh, okay. Well, I just want to let you know that I got my cat.’ I'm like, okay, well, you know it's the fact you know your daughter is going to get married!?! She's very like, ‘yeah’ [nonchalantly].

She'll do all the talk, but she won't do any of the work ... so it was definitely discouraging, you know. Having a couple friends over the years going, 'Oh, where's your mom or oh where's your dad,' you know? I was like, 'well, my dad ... I haven't met him' blah, blah, blah. My mother is this, blah, blah, blah. And then I end up meeting my father and found out it was the complete opposite way, you know. At one point I used to scream at my teachers, 'my mother is not off/on crack cocaine! I don't know what you're going off about!' And you know, I was so in denial because, you know, I was Mommy's girl and I was so in denial that I had no clue what was going on behind the scenes and then just one day it clicked. It was like, shit, these teachers and these people and Child Protective Services aren't lying to me. Like she's actually off, and she's incapable of taking care of me anymore.

I ask the reader to place themselves in Mary's shoes; if your home life was this challenging and you were estranged from your parents, how do you suppose you would focus, engage, or have success in school? Do you think you would need understanding and support? Would you need a trusted adult at school to coach and counsel you?

Inside-out Message: Losing Interest in Friends

Mary continues with her collage description and the telling of her school story. She speaks about her loss of interest in sustaining friendships with her peers. This is another account of Mary's withdrawal from the things she thought would bring her contentment and happiness at school. As she stated before, she deliberately moved away from her friendships to protect or shield her friends from being victims by association. She did not want her peers to be painted with the same brush, so she distanced herself from them. In this portion of her dialogue, she expands on this viewpoint and describes feelings of depression from the confines and restrictions she imposed upon herself, as she explains:

Yeah, yeah, experience the world with friends. Obviously one of the biggest things – we wake up, we go to school, we're excited to see all of our friends. It gets to a point where you wake up and you don't even care your friends are there. You don't even know who's there. You just don't even want to go.

Sometimes when adults or other children punish a child with negativity, the child loses their sense of worth, and this can begin a cycle of self-criticism, destructive thoughts, and self-harm. Mary, hearing she is a liability and then asked to leave her high school, created leanings toward self-devaluation. Mary goes on to name the word “opportunity” that is placed on her collage as she expounds on the meaning behind the selection of this word, as she explains:

‘Opportunity’ kind of falls in with your future and going anywhere and doing anything. Really, you have a world filled with opportunities, but again, when you get to high school, it doesn't feel like that. You feel like you're never going to get out of high school. You feel like you're no better than people that are still in elementary, quite frankly.

Outside-in Message: Missed Opportunities; “You’re Not Capable”

Mary continues by explaining the impact of missed opportunities in high school; the empowerment she expected from pursuing her future goals, stolen from her, as she laments:

My first high school, they had dismissed me because of my health issues and said that they didn't want me as a liability. So there goes half of my opportunities because that high school was going to be the start of my life. And then when you get switched over to another high school and you kind of get the same vibes. You kind of think, okay, well all of my opportunities have slipped away because they're holding me back because they don't feel that one, I'm mentally capable. So, they've shown me that they don't think I'm capable, so it's just automatically a belief. So, it's an opportunity that has been taken

from me. So, if one teacher gives up on me, 10 teachers give up on me. What kind of professors are going to give up on me in college after I pay them for my time, you know?

So, it definitely takes away the vision of having as many opportunities as you can.

Mary's words hold great meaning to this study of identity development as she expresses a lack of self-esteem generated from a system that she purports highlighted her deficits by literally asking her to leave because of them. Indeed, the decisions concerning her future, imposed upon her by those who have comfort, security and privilege, have impeded her progress and caused her great vulnerability, harm, isolation, emotional duress, and self-doubt. The *outside-in*, expert driven decisions from school administrators and teachers have limited and demeaned her. Her account illustrates how an ableist lens shapes biased impressions of her; defined through a diminishment of physical and emotional capabilities. Mary does not have a sense of her strengths at this point in her story. Place yourself again in Mary's position; how would you feel if you were told you were a liability? Would you gain confidence from being advised that your community school cannot help you? Would that generate a positive sense of self? From these messages, Mary has been weakened, her wounds still open, raw, and substantial as she shares her story years later. These wounds, especially at the time of receiving them, created an identity of self-doubt and fear concerning her capabilities and her future.

As a result of the school system labelling Mary as a liability, this label was broad reaching; carried from school personnel and passed along from teacher to teacher to counsellor, into her social life and circle of friends, with parents of friends likewise showing a reluctance to include her in social events. Consequently, Mary references the phrase or slogan on her collage "growing healthy" as important to her, as she relays:

“Growing healthy,’ that kind of really clicks with me because health was the majority of the reason why I didn’t have friends, and that’s why I didn’t have teachers behind me. I was too much of a liability for everyone. You know I didn’t have friends cause their parents were too worried that I was a liability when I went over for a sleepover, or whatever, right.

My response to Mary’s heartbreaking offering was, “And so you felt not welcome as a result of having a health issue? You felt that [your school] was supposed to be your safe space to grow and then the message you received was the opposite?” To which Mary responded with, “The complete opposite.” Working from a strengths-based lens, I responded with, “You were, I don’t want to say it’s a disability, but at the time you had a health issue. Your ability wasn’t highlighted at all for you? Your abilities, which are many. It was just a focus on that one thing?” Mary responded, “That disability, rather than my abilities, yeah.”

Wanting more information on Mary’s perspective, the following discourse evolved from my question, “Why do you think you said, ‘when one teacher gives up on me, 10 teachers give up?’” I was looking for her justification and perhaps more examples of how she felt excluded by her teachers. Mary responds:

Mary: That’s how it happens.

Investigator: Why do you think that it happens that way?

Mary: I mean, in all reality teachers don’t like to say that they don’t have their own little cliques, you know what I mean. But we’re human. That’s how we’re built to fit into our own groups. We’re built to fit in with the people who we are the most comfortable with and when you have a group of teachers who are connected to the hip all day, every day, you know. It takes just one teacher’s bad influence to shred everybody else’s appearance on you.

Investigator: Did you feel that’s what happened in your case?

Mary: That's exactly what happened, you know. I became a liability because of my health. All the teachers literally shunned me.

I had [name of teacher redacted] that was the only teacher that would give me the time of day with anything personal or school wise. It's definitely, should I say, it's the real world, no matter where you go.

So, in saying that, it's kind of putting it into perspective; you go out to the everyday world, just coming out your house, and there's always going to be that group of 10 people that are going to look at you with that nasty look. And you're always going to wonder, why? And that's what it feels like when you're walking around a group of teachers that you very well know that one teacher talked to 10 teachers who talked to 20 teachers. You feel it, you feel the presence of just not being welcomed. Having those opportunities ripped from you because again, you have 20 teachers looking at you like you're nothing. Like you, you don't equal anything.

Investigator: Thus, you said the sails were taken down.

Mary: Yeah, they took them down. They took my boat apart piece by piece and all that I'm left with is barely the floating piece.

Shunned: “They took my boat apart piece by piece and all that I’m left with is barely the floating piece”

Mary’s metaphor, her boat being dismantled piece by piece, again displays her genuine depth of thought and her strong communication style and language skills. Like the sailboat that has been taken apart, so too was Mary’s life dismantled and taken apart. She provides a strong visual for how she felt about what happened to her; while she also points out the danger and impact of how shared conversations and biased colleague perspectives can contaminate opinions and create *story-o-typing* of students. As Mary discusses this impression, she also comments again on how her interpretation of body language played an important role in how she felt, as she expresses, “You feel it, you feel the presence of just not being welcomed.”

Something I have always been aware of, as a counsellor and through counsellor training, is the importance of holding your bias. To share it with someone else can mean that we knowingly or unknowingly impact another’s views or perspective about a student. It is also why I choose to refrain from reading recorded notes and impressions about a student before meeting

them. I would prefer to remain neutral and hold any biases external to the child so as not to engage in the active *story-o-typing* of someone. I also thought, as I read Mary's account of being shunned, that she could be suffering with suspicion or mistrust of the system and those in it given her previous negative impressions of other community and family systems. I can understand how early negative experiences might have impacted Mary's opinions of her teachers.

Inside-story: Judgement from Teachers: Feelings of Isolation; “You just literally feel black and cold and alone”

Mary moves on to reference another phrase placed on her collage, “the whisper on the night wind,” as she continues to explain how she felt “shunned” by her teachers, leading to a feeling of coldness within her. Mary explains:

Mary: ‘The whisper on the night wind.’ I resonated with that a lot cause it really; it felt like, you know, you could have your hand raised in class and have a specific question, and it would be, ‘why would you ask that question?’ And someone else would ask the exact same question and [the teacher] would be like, ‘oh such a good question, let's go and work on that.’ It's like okay, well, I just feel like I'm literally just walking down, like, if you can picture it, just a picture it, just a pitch black street, completely snowing and you're just being blown by the wind, you just literally feel black and cold and alone. You know you just feel like you're kind of being breezed around and you'll float to where you float, ending up wherever you end up sometimes.

Investigator: Well, that's a pretty powerful metaphor that you've offered there. That you felt that you were treated differently from others, and that as a result you were ...like no one was helping you and you were just there by yourself being blown around at someone's whim or the wind?

Participant: Just kind of, you know, jump how high. That's kind of what it felt like. You were just waiting for the next person to give you the demand; the next person to make an assumption for your life.

As I reflect over Mary's school story and absorb her words, I am so impressed by how she expresses herself. If only her ability to communicate could have been encouraged while she was in high school, how might this sort of acknowledgement of strengths encouraged and sustained her? Indeed, with this sort of encouragement, her experience might have been different. And, in reading Mary's words, I am once again struck by the visual picture she paints. Her style of

expression, her verbal prose is captivating. Hearing it and allowing it to sink deeply into my own psyche, I can almost touch and feel how cold she must have felt back then. These are the words of a child in our public education system: "...just picture it, just a pitch black street, completely snowing and you're just being blown by the wind, you just literally feel black and cold and alone." And in feeling this way, Mary offers us more food for thought as she wisely states:

...it's really hard to grow healthy when the one place you go...you're told you go to school and you can grow here and you can have as much love as you want, as much care as you want from school, and it's actually the complete opposite. It really takes away the aspect of growing healthy. You just feel like you're kind of taking 10 steps back for every step forward.

Mary: Expert on Herself, Shares Her Wisdom and Insights on the Power of the Positive

As Mary's narrative continues, the remaining part of her story focuses on her strengths and the wisdom she has gleaned from living through a very difficult childhood. While spoken from the vantage of a young woman, the wisdom, insight, and meaning she shares from her childhood experiences is extraordinary. As John Campbell once said, "If you want to change the world, you have to change the metaphor" (Flowers, 1991. p. 23), and Mary does this so well. To this point, Mary's shift in tone points to the innate resilience that is so often seen within those who have struggled; the human will determined to rise above and to reach for better.

Inside-out Story: Theme of Resilience; "Yes, you can handle this"

"Can you handle this?" Mary recites this expression in reference to the words selected and placed on her collage. She continues, "It was the number one question of the day. Can you handle this? Oh my gosh, even to this day I still wonder, can I handle this, like holy cow." Mary

responds to her own question by offering advice to others who may have struggled in some form while in school:

My life can get some brutal, but I mean, ... I'll tell anybody going into high school and realizing the reality of the fake that they portray to you is, yes, you can handle this ... you'll learn the skills to handle it. You'll learn the skills to be able to keep on and you'll learn the skills to be able to pass them on to your loved ones, to your children. ... it doesn't feel like you can handle it, but you can. You know each kid is unique in their own way and until you give them that option, to show their uniqueness, they're giving them nothing to live for ... And that's all you need, you know, someone to look at you and go, 'I'm proud of you.' That's all anyone needs ever.

Damage/Trauma Remains Long After High School

Mary's narrative shifts to what she has learned from her hardships, and while there are lingering physical and psychological injuries, she has made the deliberate decision to focus on building a happier, more fulfilling life for herself. Before moving on with her positive musings as she offers us what she has learned from her public-school experiences, she does so with her trauma at the forefront of her mind. Indeed, she does not forget her trauma but instead moves on from it, as she states, "...like literal physical damage has been done to the mental part of you. High school damage will forever be carried along with you. You can be in your 90's and still have those exact same images in your head." Yet, she has prevailed and demonstrated she is someone who has been able to process much of her trauma, as she explains:

Sometimes people take it to the physical part, you know, self-harm. You know damage has been done. I have scars all over me and the damage has been done, yes, but when I look at those scars in the mirror, at the end of the day I go, 'I lived through that.' You

know? It shouldn't have gotten that bad, but it did. And I'm still here ... I lived through that. So, you know, you look at these cuts and you look at that pill jar you kept because it was unsuccessful, you know, you look at these things and you go, 'I should very much be dead. I very much feel like most days I want to be dead, but I'm here.' And in saying that, I still gotta be resilient. I still gotta get back up, and I still gotta go figure out what the heck I'm going to do with the rest of my life because no one else is going to do it for me. They made it very clear, no one else is going to help me or do it for me, you know. And that's why I'm so thankful for this school [referring to her current adult ed program].

Resilience Found through Positive Reinforcement (Adult Education Model)

Mary's mention of the adult education model demonstrates and underscores what was missing within her in public school experience. At her adult learning school or network she has found the acceptance and positive reinforcement she had expected and yearned for at her community high school. Mary explains the stark contrast between these two experiences as she affirms the support she has at her current school and the appreciation she feels about her positive experience there as she conveys:

They're like, 'when you're done, come back and volunteer. Just you know, hang out with us.' You know, it felt nice to be reinvited back, or you know. They were like, 'I'd love to see you in your uniform once you become a police officer. Like, we want to see you get somewhere.' And I needed that. Like, thank you. I would burn down an entire city to keep this school going, because this program here is definitely, they show you that you have each other.

Positive Reinforcement/Encouragement Helps: “I am proud of you,” was missing

Mary found the positive messages at her adult learning network/program. What was missing from her previous school(s) was found there. Mary makes a statement that is indicative of her experience in adult education as she states, “... they show you that you have each other.” With that sentiment, Mary stresses the importance of letting people know they not alone. But unfortunately for Mary, she felt so very alone at her public school. Mary speaks of offering students positive acknowledgement. She reminds us of the importance of saying, “I see you; I believe in you; I’m proud of you.” She explains how significant and important it is to show others that we care as she provides an example of a recent encounter she had with an upset cashier where she was shopping. She briefly describes the following personal story to demonstrate this point:

You know, the other day, I went to... Giant Tiger, and a cashier was crying. She was in tears. I was like, ‘Are you okay, honey?’ And she was like, ‘No, this customer just came through and lost it because I wasn't able to return something.’ I was like, ‘Honey like in all reality, just brush it off.’ And she's like, ‘I know it's easier said than done though.’ And I was like, ‘oh like I genuinely know, like how hard it is to brush it off, but at the end of the day, stay resilient and put that smile on because at the end of the day, you know, I'm proud of you.’ And she goes, ‘Thank you, I needed that.’ And I was like, ‘yeah, I know cause all of us need it from time to time. We need to be reminded someone is proud of us.’ You know, whether it's your blood or whether it's a complete stranger. You know, I'm a stranger to that woman, never seen her before, but I told her I was proud of her. Because she looked like she could really use it and sure enough, I left

there and she had a smile on her face. My job was done. I felt confident I'd done the right thing.

Inside-Out Story: Wants to Help Others

Listening to Mary and hearing how she shows care for others, I responded by reinforcing her innate goodness. I too agree with Mary in her recognition of the positive, which led to the following exchange:

Investigator: And that's who you are; You are a natural nurturer. It sounds like that's how you interact with the world, yeah? You're picking up on other people's sadness or distress, and you're wanting to help them through that.

Mary: Because I know how that feels. It feels like crap. You have no one; thinking no one's proud of you. It feels like hell.

Investigator: But that's who you are, that is very clear. Like in all of this, this description that you're offering ... you want to offer goodness to people, right? And you have that, like that's who you are. But that was kind of like pushed down. It looked like you were just on the peripheral of things and nobody invited that from you. And so, you walked away, wondering, you know, what's the matter with me?

Mary: Yeah, like what's wrong with me? Why is no one proud of me, you know?

Qualities of Goodness, Individual “Strengths” are Evidenced in Mary’s Discourse

As our conversation continued, I had realized at this moment how very easy it was to be in conversation with Mary. My impression of our ease with one another goes back to the trust we established early in the research process. It went right back to a month prior when we met to discuss her potential participation in the project and the intention to capture her authentic story of *educational stratification* and *story-o-typing*. I needed help and she wanted to help me, but in helping me, she was also going to help herself and perhaps help others by sharing her story. And in witness of Mary’s story, I am sincerely grateful to her for her wisdom and courage; and for so easily showing me her goodness, and in return, to be able to mirror that back to her. Indeed, this process to me is the essence of asset or strengths-based discourse. The positive exchange is

mutually beneficial. And one of Mary's strengths is undoubtedly that of gentle kindness, something for everyone to aspire toward. As I had this epiphany, I offered her the following remarks:

That innate quality of goodness and nurturing and wanting to offer that to people, that's who you are and how you're going to express yourself in your life, and you do that anyway. It's not like a future thing, it's now. It was probably then too, but ...

As Mary responds, she cites what we know about human nature; people can only give what they have been offered, and when you have missed being told, 'I'm proud of you,' it is hard to offer it to someone else. Mary replies:

I didn't want to offer other people the satisfaction of being told they were proud because I was never given that, you know what I mean? So, at one point it was kind of like, 'well, no one's proud of me so no one's proud of them' ... you know, like no one's proud of anyone.

A New Family

Luckily for Mary, her story takes a positive turn as she moved to Dartmouth, Nova Scotia and met her fiancée. Mary has moved in with her fiancée and has a new family. In this new family dynamic, she found the acceptance, comfort, and support she dreamed of having when she was young and alone. Mary explains:

And then, I couldn't tell you what day, but someday it just magically clicked, and it was like, I really could just use this. And meeting my in-laws, that is one thing you know, meeting me at 18 and finishing the last year of me being an actual child was with them. And they said the one thing ...well, actually two things you're supposed to keep up on. One, your imagination: never let your imagination go, cause your imagination

is going to give you the willpower to do things that the reality side of your brain is saying you can't do, you know, always keep your imagination. And the second rule is, always tell yourself you're doing better than you think you are. And that's, you know, meeting them that's all I needed at 18, that's all I needed. Yeah, turning 19 I have the best outlook on life, and turning 20, I was you know, I started getting myself back on the track, started school. I started here. I just had turned 20 and here I am, at 21 finishing school and I have a recommendation waiting for me at the police station for July.

A Positive Pivot: Meeting her In-laws

My response to Mary's disclosure of newfound buoyancy and optimism was with the following comment:

Investigator: But you know, what you just named, your in-laws ... those people that offered you that message, that positive message was the missing piece, right? Like so important... once you heard that you were like off and sailing.

Mary: Like, that was literally it, that's all.

Mary's life, as she recounts it here, shows a positive pivot. Perhaps the first of many positives from this point onward. Mary has now experienced safety and security in her new life with her in-laws. Picking up on her earlier words, "prepare to pivot," I reminded her that this statement attached to her collage was a relevant statement she had previously made. Mary responded with:

That was my first good pivot in life. It was my first, like yeah, I made it this far and someone's proud of me, you know. And I had the chance to explain my entire story to my in-laws. And even after that they still go, 'I'm proud of you.' It's amazing. Okay [deep sigh], like I haven't been doing this all for nothing, you know. And obviously I am proud of myself. But again, I never give myself enough credit, no one does. You're waiting on the whole world to give you that, and that's definitely something that you know over the

years I'll stick to a little more of is to do that for people. That's all I could have asked for growing up, just somebody to give me the time of day; to ask, 'are you okay?' And if not then to at least say, 'I'm proud of you. Keep it up.'

Inside-Out Message: “That’s all I could have asked for growing up, just somebody to give me the time of day; to ask, ‘are you okay?’”

Mary’s wisdom portrays someone who is much older. As she has lived through much personal hardship, isolation, and cruelty, her words hold the lessons only achieved from personal and academic strife and homelessness. I mirror them back to her as I repeat, “‘Are you okay? And, ‘I'm proud of you.’ It's so important to receive these messages.” From this aspect of our conversation, Mary guides me to her insights on our world and our conditioning, indicating they can function on a superficial level. She speaks of the heavy burden she felt carrying the weight of her circumstances and the impact these experiences had on her mental health. She explains:

Not often talked about, you know, in the real world they want you to burrow your feelings down your throat and continue on like it never happened, right?

It's not the reality of it though. You keep doing that – that's when mental health issues come out of the womb, because you're literally, you're just piling and piling and piling and then your brain is going to snap! Well, what happens when you snap? What happens if you never come out of the snap? You know what? It can just fall into a mental health crisis. Like how are you supposed to recover from that? You can't. So definitely, you need a couple more people around to reinforce the fact that like, 'you're okay. Everything you're doing is perfect and just keep doing.'

In response to her words, I offer the positive reinforcement of, “Who you are is perfect and everything you're doing is perfect and you are a perfect version of yourself.”

Inside-out Message: Comparisons not Helpful; “You’re competing with yourself”

As I share these words with Mary, she picks-up on this idea and offers more of her thoughts and insights. She discusses the importance of focusing on your own development, rather than comparing yourself to someone else. Mary explains:

And that's all you're competing with ... You're not competing with Sally down the street. You're not competing with the other ... across the globe, you're competing with yourself. You're competing with yesterday. The you that you were yesterday, that's the only difference you should be making today, is becoming better you than you were yesterday.

To this end, I pressed for more as I asked Mary, “Did you feel when you were in high school that you were being compared to your peers?” She responded by commenting on how many of her peers had two-parent families and she felt others were treated differently than she was, as she states:

You know, seeing all of my friends be treated one way and then seeing me be treated another, it was purely because, you know, all of my friends, their mom and dad had been together still, you know. The majority of the people at the school that I went to originally, all of their families were together – like mom and dad were still married or mom and dad were making it work as co-parents. You know what I mean? Yeah, it was, it was hard being compared to them. And I would be lying if I had said that I wasn't jealous because I was absolutely jealous. You know, teacher would come up and be complete smiles [with

them and then] come over to me and it would be like they just walked into a cloudy room.

As we continue in conversation, Mary expresses how difficult it was being treated differently than her peers. But today, with time and healing, she does not hold any resentment or jealousy toward her peers. In response to this, I suggest to her:

Yeah, well you have that, you know, desire to see other people have success, and again that's a real strength for you. Even having gone through everything you've gone through, like the fact you still want good for people, because sometimes that doesn't happen.

Outside-in Messages: Comments Stated Constructively, Not Destructively, Help with Growth and Development

In response to this comment, Mary discusses her positive experience in cadets and how that helped her pursue and obtain her leadership skills. Cadets was a positive experience for Mary because she valued developing as a person given the constructive feedback she received, which she felt made her more capable. She goes into this a bit more as she conveys:

Yeah, and that's like cadets ...I was in the Navy there for a while. Yes, that's where the whole leader comes from. I was in cadets long enough. I had made my rank, you know. I had made a difference in the military. I had made a difference to all these younger cadets coming in and seeing me being a Sergeant, you know. I had made a difference and my family, like my paternal grandmother and grandfather's side, it's all military, like everything is military. So constructive criticism is like one of my best things. People are like, 'you take it way too well.' It's like, it's just words at the end of the day, and if you're giving me constructive criticism, you're telling me things that you think are going to

improve me. You're not telling me because you think they're going to mess me up some more.

In response to Mary, I wanted to ensure that one of her strengths was named and highlighted as we spoke. So, I took the opportunity to acknowledge it in the spirit and thrust of strengths-based pedagogies/discourse. I wanted to ensure that she left our conversation in positivity and confidence, so I offered:

Well, it sounds like you are naturally conscientious and you... you're just a studious person. And that's really a theme that's coming through in your story, you know, but that wasn't recognized or harnessed within you by the school system. It was this other stuff that was coming in and clouding someone's perspective and so they couldn't see, YOU.

Yeah, you were up against that *story-o-typing* so strongly there

Inside-out Message: “Live and Let Learn”

From Mary's vantage, given the marginalization experienced and described at her local high school, she references another slogan selected and attached to her collage, “live and let learn.” She positions her perspective regarding this slogan by explaining the meaning behind it. She clarifies:

Okay, so we have, ‘live and let learn.’ As heartbreaking as it is for me to say out loud, you literally, you physically have to live through high school. You have to not want to completely just exit the world and then you'll learn something. But if you let high school take the toll on you the way that the system is built to do so, you won't ever learn. I mean, they try to teach you, you know, help you learn about high school beforehand, but the reality is, all of it comes after you're out and you know, ‘live and let learn.’

Thus, Mary feels she learned more about creating a positive life for herself after leaving the difficulty of high school; her new life in Dartmouth with her in-laws and in her adult learning program have renewed her belief in herself and given her hope for a happy future.

Mary continues with her commentary to discuss the next entry on her collage, “weight of the world.” Mary feels this is a repeat thought for her and says, this “is definitely a big one.” She cites “...I keep going back to 10 teachers, 20 teachers, so on so forth. I mean, literally you feel like you have the weight of the world, cause of people that are there to help you are doing the complete opposite, right?” Feeling so let down by people, perhaps as a coping mechanism, Mary then names the next phrase to on her collage, “power down,” meaning she shut off her emotions in self-preservation or self-protection. She expounds:

‘Power down’ was definitely the majority of the high school experience. When you keep getting all of these negative vibes and all these negative personas of yourself. Like this is what you're supposed to be here? This is what you look like in my eyes? You do shut down, you completely just ‘power down.’ You power off. Like your emotions completely shut down. You want to be as cold-hearted as you can be. So people are walking all over you, cause clearly, at some point, you know, you gave that impression that you can be walked all over, you know? Like it's just kind of ...So powering down ...

Inside Message: “You owe it to yourself”

Hearing Mary describe her need to shut off emotionally to survive, I can understand how her self-reliance and resilience factored into her selection of the next entry; “you owe it to yourself.” In saying this, she explains how she had “nobody else” and “... if I could write a thousand-word essay on it, I would.” In the time we had together during our research

conversation, however, she did offer a brief sentiment on the meaning behind this phrase, as she testifies:

You owe it to yourself.

You owe it to nobody, but yourself.

At the end of the day, you know, who is going to be going to that job for you?

You know, at the end of the day, who is going to be giving that love?

You.

You know, so you owe it to yourself ...

Worst comes to worse, your parents aren't something that you're thriving for anymore.

And your relationship just went down the drain with your friends or your loved one and now schools going down.

You owe it to yourself.

At the end of the day, you do have yourself.

You are the best you that you can be.

So, you may as well keep owing it to yourself and keep doing what you need to do.

To keep on top.

Mary, being the creative, expressive woman she is today, showcases her ability in the moment to rhyme off what is ad hoc dialogue, yet forms a dramatic piece of written prose. It is the sort of piece I can envision her reciting at a Poetry Slam event. The eloquence of her words show a very strong, resilient person who has come through a lot on her own and stands very much in hard learned knowledge and life lessons. They are words so hard to hear but illustrate a truth for Mary; she came through it on her own.

Flip Comments Illustrate the Need for Trauma Informed Schools: “Time will tell”

Mary then references the idiom, “time will tell,” as she explains how a flip comment offered by a school counsellor proved too much for her in her day-to-day struggle at school. She expresses her frustration as she recounts:

Kind of one thing that I remember, one of my counsellors; He had said, ‘time will tell darling, time will tell.’ It's like, I really don't want to wait the time time would tell was like, what, time will tell that I'll be dead 50 years, you know? Time will tell that I had passed away because of suicide and I'll be in someone's newspaper, you know? That was kind of the mindset I was in. Time will tell, it's like, well, right now it's not going very far.

To which I responded, “You have to live in the moment, right?” Indeed, a well-intentioned, yet out of touch comment had stuck with Mary over the years. She was in crisis back then. How does she live day-to-day when she is every day in chaos and desperation? Mary responded by adding, “Not, you know, one of the most helpful things I was ever told to by a counsellor. “Time will tell,” you know. It wasn't useful at the time, but it is now.... Here I am quite a few years down the road, and it really did tell.” With time and distance, and personal success, Mary can separate herself from the comment and understand the intent, in hindsight.

Exclusion: Judgement from the System

Mary continues by saying “walking with the excluded,” referring to the next statement on her collage. She explains, “I feel like you know, it's kind of really self-explanatory, walking with the excluded.” And while the meaning of it is quite evident, Mary further crystalizes the meaning of the statement as she informs, “There's always a good group of excluded and that's who I was walking with.” Looking for clarification, I asked, “Excluded by the system?” She clarified,

By the system, by their parents, by their girlfriends, boyfriends, friends, you know?

By the actual schoolwork itself, you're walking with the excluded. If your grades are at a certain point, you're walking with the excluded.

Outside-in Message: Do Better; Deficit Oriented Pedagogy

Mary continued by speaking about the next collage entry, “do better.” She discusses how she often felt the underlying, unspoken message of school was to “do better.” Regardless of the work completed and submitted to her teachers. She felt as though it was never acceptable. She makes this point by saying:

‘Do better,’ was definitely something I felt like no one actually had to physically tell me to do. I just felt like that was kind of just an unspoken thing - everyone was telling me, ‘just do better, do better, do better. That's not hard enough ... do better, do better, do better. This isn't good enough ... do better do better, do better.’ You know, you didn't finish that on time; Rip it up. Do better ... like, it's just literally how it felt.

Inside Message: Everybody Needs Help Sometimes

As Mary makes this point, she leads into the entry, “sometimes your hands could use a hand.” She doesn't spend much time discussing this saying, but my impression is that it follows the previously discussed, “do better,” because she did need more help than she received to achieve success in high school. She states, in referencing the meaning behind her choice of this phrase, “That was definitely ... very true, even the professionals are given hands, you know, even the psychiatrist. Sometimes it's just like just the reality.” In hearing Mary's words, I certainly agree. We all need help sometimes, children and adults alike. Mary focuses a bit further on this point as she references another phrase on her collage, “we can't do it alone.” She extends this point by saying:

That's a big one for me, because you know, again, I've had 'me' my entire life and there were times where I looked at myself in the mirror and said, 'I can't do this. I can't do this alone. I can't keep going through life and losing people,' and you know, death after death and I can't keep doing this alone, right? Yeah, again it brings me back to my in-laws, now that I think about them, it's like, I wouldn't be able to do any of this alone. None of this, you know. I wouldn't be here had it not been for my mother-in-law, you know? She's the reason why I'm here and she's still the reason why I'm still here, right?

Given that Mary makes the point of 'needing help' several times, it is obviously one that deserves more attention. Solutions to providing greater access to mental health services are broadly called for in our post-pandemic world. There are many students falling through the cracks. Mary's story is but one tragic example of this bigger societal issue.

Wherever You Go, There You Are: You Can't Run Away From Yourself

Mary moves on in our conversation and mentions the expression, "the disappearing act." This idea struck a chord with her and took her back to the times she attempted to run away from home, or perhaps to run away from herself. She explains this further by offering:

Picking up and going to Montreal and picking up and going to PEI; It was my 'disappearing act.' It was me hoping that disappearing was going to change my entire life, you know? They say, 'I moved to a new city and started a new life,' [but] that's not how it goes. You carry everything with you, yeah? Still the same human being, you still have the same traumatic experiences. It's like it doesn't change cause you're in a different city, you're just more overwhelmed because you're in a different city, right? You know you have nobody for sure. So yeah, 'disappearing act.'

Outside-in Message: “Uninvited”

Given Mary’s account of wanting to run away, it seems one can understand this desire to run from the pain toward something better. But feeling “uninvited” within her school and in her family, Mary describes what brought her to fleeing her life in New Brunswick. We unpack this feeling a little more:

Mary: ‘Uninvited’ was definitely, you know, just altogether, just felt uninvited to the entire situation. The second high school, more so, made me feel invited.

Investigator: They made you feel?

Mary: A little more invited, you know, kind of, but the first high school, I definitely, I mean, I wouldn't tell anyone to go to that school had I known what I was in for. But again, just because they treated me like that doesn't mean they're going to treat the next person like that. But there is a chance, there's a very good chance, so it seems they did it once, they're going to do it more right? So ‘uninvited’ but I guess the one thing I could say is, although you might feel uninvited, you're definitely invited, and you're definitely welcome. So, whether they like it or not, make yourself comfy cause you're not going anywhere.

It seems Mary’s adult self has gained perspective and her advice to those still in the system is to keep asking for help and to keep pushing for service.

Inside Message: Trust in Yourself

Mary then moves onto explain that “another future is possible,” referring to words on her collage. Her innermost feelings bubbling up to the surface, as she explains:

When you go to high school they tell you, ‘you are building your future.’ That is absolute ***** 150% bull crap. Because at the end of the day you could leave high school and the plan that you had made in grade 12 to become a carpenter, you could end up being a neurosurgeon, you know. There's always another future. Whether you had a perfect life beforehand, you just want to switch it up. Or whether you have an absolute toxic life and you need just an escape. Another future is always possible. Always. And

even if it makes you question, ‘Am I worth creating another future?’ Yes, everyone is worth creating another future. Just because the first time around didn’t work doesn't mean the second time [won’t work] ... they always say, ‘you only live life once, but if you do it right, once is enough.’

I respond to Mary’s statement with, “Your definition of success can be different than what you're told ...” To which Mary astutely offers, “Yeah, yeah, you get your education and then you go successful. No, you can be successful before getting your education. You can be successful during ... You can be successful or completely unsuccessful after getting your education you know.” Indeed, Mary conveys that success in life and in education is determined by how the person is living and interpreting their life. There are many definitions of success and many paths to it. And success by societal standards does not guarantee an overall happy or successful life. The values of society or the education system can be in contrast to the values of the individual person.

Inside-out Story: Success is Progressing Toward a Goal; It is the Journey

Wanting more from Mary on her idea of success, I asked, “What is your definition of success?” She responded with,

I definitely want to say success for me, it would be knowing there is at least somewhat of a goal to reach. And once you're able to reach that goal and you're able to stand back from it and see it physically, like this, you’re getting somewhere ...this is you finally doing right for yourself, for once, that will be success. That will be my successful day; When I go and put on that uniform and start training, that will be my successful day. When I sign my oath over and I'm pronounced as a full-time cop, that will be my success. That will forever be my success, you know, and that's kind of the same with

paramedicine ...I've been thinking about doing paramedicine on the side because you know, you work seven days off, seven days on, fire and police. Success will be getting to those ultimate goals, and even if you're halfway there, that's still successful. You're still making a lot of progress.

Mary's point in this regard is central to her story. So often we reach for the final goal or the destination, and that is defined as success. But in doing that, we miss the smaller successes. We do not savor the experiences that we accumulate on the journey as we strive toward larger goals. Mary's words are sage advice to anyone, and they are timely for me to hear as I progress on my own educational journey. I am thankful to be reminded of them.

Therapeutic Services for All: More Helpers in the System

It has been stated before, but Mary continues her comments on the expansion of mental health or therapeutic services in schools. She has placed the word "therapy" on her collage and posits:

That's something that they need to offer for free for high school students from honestly from K to 12, from kindergarten to grade 12. I firmly believe therapy should be free and accessible to everyone you know. And of course, it's not. One school usually has one therapist, you know, on average.

Inside Story: Not Good Enough

With that said, Mary is brought to her inclusion of the word "Pain" on her collage. While she cites it is "kind self-explanatory," she does offer how she felt "let down" by her school. She proclaims:

It was just a lot of pain and broken heartedness really. Like, just kind of being let down. Never feeling like I'm good enough for the education system, but also for myself, because

I'm not good enough with the education system you know ... It was kind of like, we've got better students to take care of, right?

Resilience Theme: Never give-up

Despite Mary's challenges within the school system, there are resounding notes of resilience throughout her story. This is a theme that is perhaps the most evident over Mary's life story, as she affirms, "Third times a charm," referring to her collage. She explains, "I saw that and I couldn't help but laugh cause, here I am. Third times a charm. Never give up and here I am two tests away!" However, her enthusiasm is still tempered by thoughts of the past. As she has said before, the trauma experienced never leaves, although it can be softened perhaps over time and distance. It is a kind of internal push and pull that Mary must manage in a healthy way as she presses toward creating happiness and success, and as she strives to reach her goals. She reiterates and expands upon a previous point made, as she cites:

That also goes back to "the whispers on the night wind" and "walking with the excluded," ... you just literally, you feel ice cold. You feel, kind of, there used to be a warmth inside. And over the years, you've been hurt so many times, you have no more warmth in you. And you know, you just, you just feel cold. It would just be like how people would say, a cold-hearted b!+#&, you know? You would just feel cold.

As Mary makes this profoundly sad statement on her lived reality and internal mental state, she recounts her transformation from warmth to ice cold. I take this in, and I get a sense of how she must have suffered. She then mentions, "Do it yourself," as she glances over her collage and utters, "I keep going back to that one. I have on both sides." To be sure, Mary's resilience comes from her inner fire to achieve success in the face of adversity. What was once a fire extinguished to mere embers in childhood, is now a constant flame rising within that has undoubtedly

reignited what was once reduced to ashes and coal. Resilient is a fitting word for Mary and one she has rightly earned with all she has experienced.

Inside Story: “Room to Breathe”

With Mary’s commentary referring to her next collage selection of, “room to breathe,” I am brought to the importance of her words allowing students space to reflect and breathe. Mary states, “...you know, I needed room to breathe but didn't know how to communicate it at the time.” With respect to the sentiment, “room to breathe,” Mary goes on to express:

That was definitely kind of my biggest thing, going through my deepest points. I would say to my grandparents, ‘I'm sorry for being such a mess as a kid.’ And they're like, ‘no, you were growing up, like that's what you're supposed to do. You're supposed to learn from your attitudes and such. You know, your mistakes. You are your own human.’ So, I just kept running away, right? I just needed some room, but I ran away because I thought that's what I needed. In my reality, I just needed some ‘room to breathe’ so when going into high school, I definitely recommend just taking a second for yourself every day and just inhale, exhale. Okay, we're still here. We're still kicking. We got this. Like, just, reassurance; ‘room to breathe.’ with some reassurance.

Inside-out Story: Fight for Equality; Marginalization due to Sexual Orientation

Adding another layer of complication to Mary’s life is her sexual orientation. Mary gives an account of the judgement she has faced for her sexual orientation and identity, alongside the other issues she has previously disclosed. She refers to her collage entry, “Fight inequality” as she says, “I mean it was bad enough I had health issues, then it went to me coming out as a lesbian; that was a whole thing.” To which I asked, “And how did that part of your identity, like how was that received?” She goes on to explain:

It was barely received when I had came out. It was 2012 and then, you know, it was accepted. But it wasn't necessarily accepted how it is in 2022. So, when I originally came out, I had full on dudes, like men, like just normal students, like me shoving me into lockers and locking me in them, you know? I'd be banging on lockers ... bang, bang, bang, and a teacher would come and clip off the lock and get me out of the locker and I'd be just free. You know it was very unaccepted at the time, and I mean even my fiancé now, like we'll sit back and we'll talk about it. She's a carpenter, and she was the only female in her class and her trade, you know? And she was like, 'it is hard being a female in this world. This is a man's world.' And there's females all throughout it, you know. Like it's just the brutal reality. It's kind of, you know, it's definitely ... inequality doesn't help anything, because I mean, that was just another thing to add on top of the pile of things I was already going through.

And as Mary continues, she goes on to explain that while her friends accepted her and “loved her regardless, never thought anything different” of her, she felt that she was seen as “... a weirdo that sat in the back of the class but never would talk. You know teachers wouldn't ever go to her....” To this point, I wanted to unpack that statement and get closer to the heart of her feelings, so I reiterated her statement in the form of a question, “You were quiet and withdrawn?” I had wondered about this feature of Mary's younger self and whether she had been marginalized as well for behavioral difficulties. She responded by saying, “Yeah, very, very ... because you know, just in general, like before coming out, I had all these terrifying experiences when it comes to at home, so you know ... definitely.” I pressed a bit more by asking, “Your sexuality and identity, were you withholding or withdrawing because of those parts of you as well?” Mary clarifies by saying:

Um no. Honestly, I mean, the majority of the people that knew me, they're all like, 'yeah, we know ... it's your option to come out and tell everybody.' But everyone had known. But when it came to the people that didn't know, when they were surprised, I felt at the end of the day, they were like, 'well, you're already a weirdo, now you're a gay weirdo.' Like who wants that? Nobody. So, we're going to throw you in a locker, locking it until the end of lunch when a teacher comes back around and able to unlock you or clip off the lock, you know. So, it definitely, it didn't make the high school experience any easier, but again, it made me a little more resilient because it's like, what's it to you if I'm gay? What's it to you if I'm dating a tree? What's it to you from dating a woman or a man? What's it to you? It's nothing, nothing to you. You're gonna go home and you're not even think about it again. So, leave me alone when it comes to it.

Thus, Mary's story is a complicated one, intersected and compounded by many layers of judgement from both her teachers and her peers. Yet, Mary mentions the resilience and strength that comes from her lived experience. That is the hopeful part of her story.

The Dread of September

The last collage entry Mary mentions is "Here's to a hell September." Like so many kids who find school challenging, for whatever reason, the start of the school year can provoke feelings of anxiety. And while September is promoted as an exciting time for getting back to the routine of school and seeing friends, for those who are bullied, or have school refusal, or learning difficulties, etc., it can be a time of great anxiety and stress. For Mary, given her account of *story-o-typing* and marginalization, September brought with it feelings of "dread," as she recalls:

It says, 'super September,' but I scratched 'super' out [and replaced it with 'hell.'] That's definitely kind of just sums up September. Like that feeling when September 1st hits and

you know it's coming. Like that was the most dreadful feeling is knowing I had to go back for another year. You know, after the first Grade 9 year I was like, okay I'm finally on summer break. I can relax, whatever. But then going to September, it's like, it is going to be like the same as first year you know, and for a couple of years it was the exact same thing ...

Educational Stratification: Dyslexia Led to Learning Struggles

In the last minutes of my research conversation with Mary, we covered a lot of ground and there were some pieces of valuable information and insights that came forward that helped flesh out a fuller picture of how Mary had been *story-o-typed*. Part of Mary's learning profile involved a diagnosis of dyslexia, as she disclosed, "I have a learning disability. I have dyslexia, so they're flunking me because of, you know, me, not being able to keep up with my marks." In saying this, Mary also explained that support for her dyslexia was not available. I had asked her, "Did you get resource support for having dyslexia?" She indicated she had some, but her medical condition prevented the support being continued. I did not understand this explanation, as Mary's fainting should not prevent engagement of academic support. Mary's explanation was, "I had a little bit [of support] but when it came to the fainting, they couldn't have her attached to me."

Asking for a more clarification, Mary then articulated:

... because of my fainting, there wasn't anyone equipped to have the lifesaving measures at the time. And there wasn't anyone equipped to deal with the dyslexia as well. And they couldn't hire two people just for me because the funds weren't there.

I believe this aspect of Mary's story ties into her experience of *educational stratification*. Mary, receiving the message, "please leave," must carry the burden of this message with her throughout her life. Mary's narrative is testament to the damage done.

Mary has Diabetes: “You're being dismissed”

As we continue this line of conversation, Mary tells me about a teacher's aide who was “in charge” of her and three other people. Mary communicated that the TA, “... was the single person ... [helping] everyone in the school because she was the only person that was equipped medically and learning wise to also help, right? So, she was the only one doing it all by herself.” From there, Mary explained that she had been told her only option was to attend an alternative school, as she states, “They didn't say it was a choice. They said ... you're being dismissed, and your one option is [name of school redacted].” Wondering if there was more reason for her dismissal, I asked, “Had you missed a lot of time at that point? Was that part of it?” Mary responded with, “I think the biggest part for them was my medication in the morning. I wasn't able to show up to school until 9:30 am and school started at 8:45 am.” As Mary's testimony will show momentarily, however, she later found out that her fainting was caused by a blood cell imbalance which was later determined to be complicated by a diagnosis of diabetes. Here is a child that needed medical assistance and an educational intervention. She needed a caring, supportive adult to help advocate for her needs and to assist her in finding a way back to health and to success at school. It is no wonder Mary felt so cold and alone, as she declares:

I needed the help to help myself figure out what was wrong with me. But because I didn't have the help, I was falling back on everything. So then, I was completely and literally helpless at a certain point. It's like there was no saving my education at that school.

Middle Piece of Collage: What Mary has Learned Through Darkness and Light

As in any difficult conversation, my intention was to leave Mary on a positive note. I asked, “Let's just talk briefly, then about the middle piece here. Tell me again, what does this represent?” [pointing to the middle of her collage]. Mary responds by talking about how each

side of her collage meets or culminates in the middle, where the dark and light combine; it's where she has made meaning from the lessons she has learned and the nuggets of wisdom gleaned from her experiences:

So the middle is definitely everything that I've put together over the years, and I tell myself, 'this is what I've learned from going through such a negative response in my life.' So, like I said, the resilience is key [referring to her collage] 'Still resilient,' that is something from the left to the right that never changed and never will change. You know, you're not alone; You do have yourself at the end of the day, you know. But it surely isn't reassuring when you feel like you're alone, right? So, when you're not alone, sometimes you're going to remember the sunlight, which is the left side. And the dark, which is the right side, sometimes needs to meet in the middle, and what does that bring you? It brings you sunlight in the dark. So, a little bit of light in the dark when you're going down. Like 'the whisper on the night wind' if you've got 'power down' on your mind ...

Mary is a deep thinker. It is a strength that is consistently demonstrated over our brief meeting together. Hearing Mary's account of resilience is inspiring and encouraging for anyone receiving her story of adversity. She speaks with expertise on the survival skills she has acquired, and she shares them with me as we close our conversation. And as she offers them to me, I would be remiss if I did not say how impressed and privileged I am to have had the opportunity to meet and learn from Mary. Her sage advice not only captivates my mind, but it touches the deepest part of my heart; I have taken her advice in and will attempt apply it to living my own life. It seems adversity brings with it an astute grasp of what it means to be human. No matter how old, we all need a bit of encouragement sometimes, and Mary offers this so well to herself and others.

Meditation and Role Models

Mary begins by sharing with me how meditation and breathing skills soothed her mind and body as she put them to use when she was unable to find someone to help her identify her medical problem, which she now has a diagnosis of diabetes. She shares: “‘Take a deep breath,’ was definitely, you know, breathing skills. This is like the one thing I’m the most equipped with now. It’s like, you gotta breathe for everything, you really do.

Mary then moves on to explain a meaningful quote she was introduced to by a singer on *America’s Got Talent*, called Nightbirde:

And this ... this was from my book at home actually, and her name is Nightbirde. I don’t know if you’ve ever watched *The X Factor* or *America’s Got Talent*? Nightbirde was the girl ... she had cancer and passed away. And I remember her because I just found out I got diabetes the day she passed away and in her videos that kept repeating was this [quote]: ‘You can’t wait until life isn’t hard anymore before you decide to be happy.’ And it’s printed all over my room. I have it in so many different fonts, so many different posters. Like, that is kind of the one thing I keep going back to everyday...’Life’s gonna be hard and you’re never gonna be happy,’ right? Her song is beautiful. Her song keeps me going ... It’s called, ‘It’s OK.’ It’s the one that she performed.

Inside Story: Having Faith; “Everything is going to be okay ... it needs to be.”

As I let Nightbirde and Mary’s words of wisdom pour over me in that moment, I acknowledged, “It’s okay and I see that at the bottom ‘everything is going to be okay.’” As I repeated these words back to Mary, she expounded on this point with more insight:

Yeah, and that’s kind of another thing I ultimately learned is, everything doesn’t seem like it’s going to be okay at the time, but everything is going to be okay. It needs to be. Like,

that's just how faith is set up; at some point in time you're going to go, oh I made it ...okay. We're okay everything is going to be okay, everything has been okay. We're here and everything still okay, right?

Something as Simple as a Smile can Bring Encouragement

Mary's mantra of "everything is going to be okay" served to comfort and motivate her. And as she continues, she claims that, "... not knowing what the future holds can motivate some people to appreciate life more." I suppose that ties back to Mary having faith and a belief that life can be happy, but it is a choice. Mary follows this by saying:

...what I expected from high school and what the reality was, not knowing what my future was going to hold, is what made me appreciate life more; what made me appreciate someone's smile, even one person smiling, you know? It literally it sums it all up.

Earlier on in Mary's story, she spoke quite liberally on how body language cues are a language on their own; a language she has become versed in from picking up the intentions of those around her, as she watched from the margins. And perhaps because Mary was accustomed to receiving disapproving glances much of the time, it is her suggestion that a simple smile would have meant so much to her younger self. Indeed, something so simple can mean so much to someone who is suffering, out in the cold.

Inside Story: "My own wings ... I am able to open my wings and do something"

Mary continues by explaining how "the middle [of the collage] is what I've taken from everything, you know." She goes on to share, "I got a little bird up there because I think of myself finally being that bird and being able to open my wings and do something." To which I respond with, "Yeah, free to be you." And in response, Mary, so beautifully and poignantly responds adding, "Yeah, my own wings. My own feathers. My own sky." Mary is soaring now,

high above the past judgements from others, almost as if the negativity from her past serves to lift her as she glides across the sky. It is clear skies for Mary; no more storm to shake her from graceful flight.

Inside-out Story: “Just because you’re damaged doesn’t mean you’re broken”

In the final few moments of our conversation, more wisdom streamed out of Mary. As I was thanking her for participating in my study, she offered more of herself, more advice from her perspective of surviving a youth of crisis. She professes, “The damage is done, but just because you're damaged doesn't mean you're broken.” Amazing words, and so true. Broken, Mary is not. To be sure, as Mary’s narrative demonstrates, the weaknesses of a traumatic childhood do not dictate or predict a future of sorrow and regret. Trauma can make one wiser, stronger, if focused positively. Mary’s narrative, in description of her collage, is a dichotomy of dark and light; an expression of the juxtaposition of how dark times can push one to let in “sunlight in the dark,” as Mary would say. As we have witnessed here, resiliency, while not easily acquired, is an outcome of “hope and hard work.” And true to Mary’s depth and her proclivity toward metaphorical thinking and expression, she strengthens her sage statement above, reinforcing it with, “Some of the most expensive art pieces in the world are Chinese gold bowls. It's the broken glass bowls that are repaired with pure gold.”

Advice for the System: “Sit down, have a conversation with me”

As our conversation concludes, I ask Mary one final question, seeking her advice for a public education system that she claims has treated her so poorly. I ask, “Any suggestions or anything you'd want to say to those who work in the school system? Any advice you'd want to give the system for adjustment?” She responds:

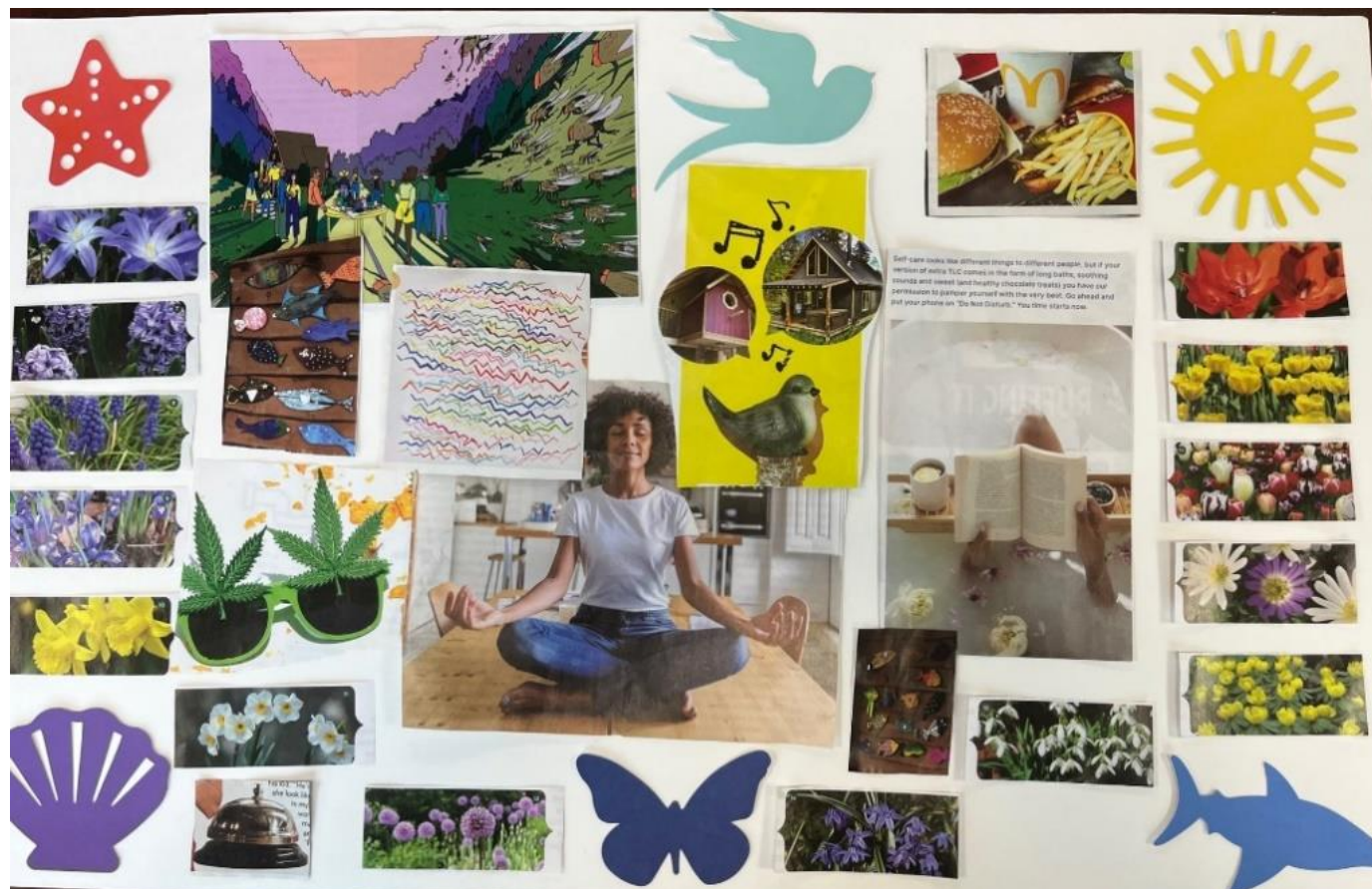
Not every kid has a happy, food filled, love filled, internet filled life at home, you know. Some people don't even have anything. Some of the students that you might be taking the time to teach might be going to a bench at the end of it... You really gotta stick to not judging people by the books. Like, the front of that cover is literally just the hard copy, you open that book, and there's so much more to it. But no one ever wants to do that, and I think as a student, the only thing I could ever ask from the teachers ... Sit down, have a conversation with me. Wonder why I might be the way I am. And then maybe you'll understand. And if then you don't understand, that is fine. At least you made the effort, and you didn't judge me from the get go. But never come up to me and assume because I'm the kid in the back of the classroom that I'm going to be the least intelligent. I'm going to make it at least, you know. Because I can guarantee those kids are going to be the ones that are gonna make it the furthest. That's always going to be the case.

Thank you, Mary. You have shown us that there is so much more to know if we are willing to open the book to see and read its contents. To take in the story without judgment, in full appreciation and discovery of individual wisdom and potential that lies just beneath the surface – enabled to bloom when the climate is warm and inviting of full growth.

Carly's Story

Figure 4

Carly's Collage (1 of 2)



Carly is a 45-year-old female. She has a neurodivergent learning profile and was enrolled in Learning Centre programming in her youth, attending public school in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. She has special needs and requires assistance to write given a physical disability which affects her arms/hands. She likewise had behavioral issues while attending public school. While she graduated from a local high school, she is currently enrolled in an adult learning program given her love of learning and her desire to fully engage in her community. She was screened into this study despite having her high school diploma because she met all other study selection criteria.

Figure 5

Carly's Collage (2 of 2)



Carly eagerly showed an interest in participating in this study due to her story of struggle while enrolled in public school. Carly had graduated from high school in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia in the mid 1990s. She was eligible for inclusion in this study due to her experience of academic and social marginalization and the stigma and *story-o-typing* she encountered; Carly was in an academic minority population given that her learning profile categorized her as

neurodivergent. Over Carly's generation, a label of neurodivergent streamed her into a separate classroom related to a Special Education program where her learning needs placed her outside of the established neurotypical norm. In her generation, without the benefit of computers in classrooms, Carly's physical challenges impacted her cursive writing and note taking; she needed intensive assistance from a teaching assistant while she was enrolled in her program. Carly graduated with a high school certificate in Nova Scotia with what is now called an Individualized Program Plan (IPP). Her IPP offered her a modified curriculum and differentiated learning outcomes resulting in a high school graduation certificate that placed limitations on her learning and her post-secondary options.

Neurodivergent is framed in the research literature as someone having atypical bio-neurological and cognitive features, impacting physiological and behavioural traits which are, to varying degrees, divergent from the typical or broader population. Clouder, et al. (2020) define "... 'neurodiversity,' [as] an umbrella term, originally coined in relation to autism, for several conditions traditionally pathologized and associated within a deficit, including dyspraxia, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyscalculia, autistic spectrum and Tourette syndrome," and assert that "... any of these conditions is due, at least in part, to society's attitudes and actions, rather than to the condition per se." (p. 758). While Legault, et al. (2021) describe and place the definition within the critical realm of discourse. They discuss the contrast of neurotypical and neurodiverse development by dissecting the two terms to show how privilege has shaped neurodivergence toward deficit-oriented delineations. They write:

The epistemically dominant group ... is the group commonly known as 'neurotypicals,' that is, those whose cognitive profile corresponds to the established norm. The group (or groups) whose cognitive profile deviates from that norm and does not benefit from the

same epistemic power and cognitive privilege is sometimes known as “neuroatypical”, but more commonly as ‘neurodivergent.’ (p. 12844).

With these definitions in mind, Carly’s story will portray her experience as a student who is neurodivergent and who encountered judgement and *story-o-typing* related to her learning differences.

Special Education Program: Ring a Bell for Service

Over the first part of my conversation with Carly, she discussed her experience in high school and her involvement in a special education program. She conveys that she had special learning considerations, but others in her class presented with higher needs than she had. Over the early part of our conversation, Carly speaks about not receiving the help she needed. Feelings of marginalization resulted from the dismissive treatment she claimed she received. The classroom set-up, which required that students ring a bell for service, seemed to cause further distress given that assistance was not easily accessible.

To begin addressing the themes named above in this portion of our discussion, Carly felt that the other students in her class received more assistance than she did. Finding it difficult to ask and receive the help she needed, she begins by saying, “Well, there's more staff in there [describing her special education classroom] to help, but they were focusing on the ones that were a bit higher [needs] than me.” To which I offered, “Higher needs than you? You didn't feel like you got the help you needed all the time?” Carly responded with, “Not all the time, no. That's when the teacher that was teaching said, believed in her head I guess, that I could be independent to work on my own.” This message caused Carly feelings of discouragement as she was left sitting idle much of the time, waiting for her teacher or the teacher’s assistant to provide her with individual attention. Looking for more information from Carly, I followed by asking

Carly, “Okay, and was that true? You could be independent and work on your own?” From this question, the following dialogue ensued:

Carly: On some things, but then when they came to taking all the notes and that, I was looking for help.

Investigator: And did you get help at that point?

Carly: No, no, they just wanted me to keep on working. Keep on going, working, doing.

Investigator: And how did that make you feel?

Carly: Discouraged that I didn't even want to be at school.

Investigator: You were discouraged?

Carly: Yeah.

Investigator: And is any of that depicted here in your collage?

Carly: I just wanted to hide myself in the corner. Yes, I rang for help [pointing to a picture of a bell on her collage].

Investigator: I see a bell on your collage and that you would ring a bell and that would mean you're asking for help from your teacher?

Carly: Yeah, yeah.

Investigator: And would your teacher then come to help you?

Carly: If they're not helping someone else, but the odd time they would say, ‘try to do it on your own.’

Investigator: Was the bell for you? Or was the bell for everyone?

Carly: Everyone, the bell would be there. But I'm raising my hand, waiting, waiting, waiting, waiting. I would make a noise at the bell [motioning tapping] for someone.

Investigator: Yes, and did you feel that you got the help?

Carly: Very seldom, no.

Investigator: And why do you think that is?

Carly: They were wanting you to either try to do the stuff on your own, to work independent. Because there were a couple of others that were more serious than me. They were more handicapped... Um, but there were more serious disability people than me. Someone in a wheelchair.

Investigator: So you felt they needed more help than you needed?

Carly: Well, that's what the teacher felt.

Investigator: Okay, is that true?

Carly: Uh, some of it is true, but I know I would need help. I have a major disability with my hands being a problem.

Carly being told, “try to do it on your own,” perpetuated feelings of exclusion and isolation as her request for help went unfulfilled. Carly expands on this point with my asking her how she felt when her requests for help went unanswered. She conveyed, “I felt like going in the corner away from everybody, just hide myself.”

Outside-in Story: You're Too Slow/Rushed Learning; “You're not keeping up”

Carly continues as she describes how her physical disability prevented her from keeping up with the class. She makes this point by stating, “Well, they were rushing me, they were rushing me.” To clarify, I asked, “Who was rushing you?” She responded with,

The teachers, because they would have notes on the board and it'll take me the whole class to just get it all copied down because of my background; I'm slow and I got problems with my hands ...I'm trying to get it so that I can keep up with the class and stuff. And then back at the old [referencing her public school], there was one teacher that said I couldn't be in that class because I couldn't keep up with them. Well, I will always be like that. I will always have problems with my hands so I need help writing stuff. I can do a little bit, but just not as much.

Carly continues along this vein by revisiting her commentary on the lack of help she received from her teacher and two other teaching assistants. Given the repeat nature of her comments, it seems this issue was a particularly troublesome memory for her, as she claims:

I would ask one of them to help me. They would just go on about helping the others.

I'm like sitting there in the corner, it felt like ... (pause) just trying to catch up and take my time and do it ... I would raise my hand, but there wasn't a hand [meaning help from her teachers], so I would ring for help [pointing to a picture of a bell on her collage].

Health Issues Compounded Ease of Learning

Carly believes her problems in school and the judgement she faced from her teachers and peers was compounded by her health issues. While Carly had mentioned her health issues before, she opens up to explain how having seizures (epilepsy) compounded her struggles in school.

Carly explains,

... when I was younger, I would have to take Dilantin pills and stuff because I would be getting seizures all the time. I grew out of it, but then when I became a teenager it happened again. Now I'm out of it again and hopefully, knock on wood, I won't get it anymore, but I can't judge ... whatever happens.

Outside-in Story: Judgement: Being Neurodiverse/Inside-out Story; "I'm a human being."

Moving on in our conversation, Carly glances at her collage and says, "talk a child down from a snapping turtle." This quote selected and placed on Carly's collage represents how she felt the adults and her peers spoke to her as she explains, "Okay, they should have talked to me on their level and not like trying to put me way behind them. That's why I chose that"

Wanting a bit more from Carly on what this meant for her, I followed with, "So you felt that people talked down to you? And that made you feel?" Carly offered:

Yeah, more discouraged. Not wanting to be there at school. That's the way I felt back then ... that I was down here and they were up there. Instead of being at my level and we both being there to talk to me. I'm a human being. I will understand some things, that's the way I look at it. Don't use big words, just use words that I would understand.

As Carly continued, she describes how she literally felt intellectually marginalized by her teachers and her peers over her public-school career. She comments on how this theme continues to play out in her life today. I then ask her, “Do you still feel discouraged by that now?” The following dialogue helps to flesh out Carly’s impressions concerning how others interact with her:

Carly: Depends on who comes to talk to me, yes. Because some of them don't care how they talk to me.

Investigator: Who are they typically?

Carly: Like different members of the other programs [in reference to her current learning network]. And a few here [in reference to those in her class].

Investigator: If you could give them a message on what you need, what do you think they need to know?

Carly: I should tell them to be more understanding with me. I am a human ... just not talk to me as I'm a piece of dirt ... behind me.

Investigator: You felt that when you were young and sometimes you feel that now?

Participant 2: Yeah, yeah, but now I know what they do, because I'm a bit older and I know more; To go to the staff, just walk away from them and go to the staff.

Outside-in Story: Bullying/Exclusion from Students/Physical and Emotional Violence

Carly, while older, clarifies that she still needs people to advocate for her and to intervene when judgmental words are directed at her. It seems the issue of being judged, story-o-typed, and bullied, something that started in Carly’s youth, is still experienced in her adulthood. And as

Carly reflects on the *story-o-typing* she experienced in her past and still faces today, she recounts memories of the bullying from her childhood and how they impacted her. She explains:

Carly: I remember back to high school. In junior high a little bit ... and in elementary. The similar thing that happened in junior high happened in elementary. They've always been picking at me and bullying me and stuff.

Investigator: That was the students?

Carly: Yeah, in junior high, Yeah, but they said it's more teasing me and stuff, but the way I took it, it was being nasty to me and stuff.

Investigator: Right, so it was hurtful ...

Carly: Yeah, and come junior high age, I got kicked out and suspended a lot because I got a bit older and I wanted to fight back; ...what I didn't like, they should have suspended the other person as well as me, not just one person.

Investigator: Just you?

Carly: Just me, they didn't do anything to the other people.

Investigator: Why do you think that was? How did you feel about that?

Carly: I felt that wasn't right. That was more criticizing ... they didn't want me to be in the class I guess and didn't want me to be in the group or even want me to be there.

Investigator: Those were the students?

Participant 2: Yeah

As Carly touches upon how she was bullied and ostracized by her peers in school, she looks to her collage and the picture she selected to portray this repeat occurrence and theme over her school story. She points out a picture to me, which looks to me like "...a scene with people milling about in the center and then there is a bunch of [what] ...looks like ... flies swarming the people; they're moving down to swarm them or someone." This portrayal prompts Carly to describe the meaning behind this picture for her. She offers:

I mean, it felt like ... I remember it felt like when I was in school ... the group of kids would come in at me to start a fight with me. That's why I chose that, but I couldn't find anything that was similar to them coming to attack me.

As Carly explained this scene, I sought clarifying information and asked, "You said you felt often attacked by this students?" She agreed by offering, "Yeah," and continued,

In the neighborhood I grew up in, there was one of me and say five of them coming to start a fight with me all [at] the time. So basically, why come in a gang and fight one person? That's not right.

As I listened to Carly describe the terrifying experience of being physically attacked by a group of students, I asked, "How did you defend yourself?" "I couldn't," Carly exclaimed, as she went on to say,

... and so the last fight that I remember ... they were coming at me again. And the parents of the girl that was coming that started the fight with me, the mother came outside too and said to the other four girls, 'Stay out of it. Stay back. Let her fight me.'

After making this point, Mary did not pontificate on it or offer much more, other than to say, "...now today that one girl is now grown up with a family of her own and a good friend of mine. But considering the neighborhood I grew up in ...they were always coming and gangsters fight." Keeping to a trauma informed approach in our conversation, I did not want to press for much more in case it provoked discomfort in Carly, so I asked, "Did you feel that you were strong? How did you get through that?" Carly answered with, "Once I left the school and left that neighborhood and moved away from that, things changed. After I had my child and left the neighborhood, things turned around." As Carly makes a reference to having a child, our conversation changes direction as she discloses that Child Protection Services removed the child

from her care just after she gave birth. She has been eagerly waiting for her daughter to make contact with her over the past twenty-three years.

Outside-in Story: Marginalized by Other Systems (Community Services)

Carly is currently waiting for her daughter to contact her again; she believes her daughter will make contact with her in the future and she looks forward to establishing a relationship with her. Carly explains that she's ...

Just waiting for my daughter come to me. And well, she already came to me. They were trying ... She was trying to find me back in 2017, but I call them idiots; a community service worker. The first one, she wouldn't give her any information. Now this new worker, she has called me and said your daughter would like to get in contact with you. Here's her e-mail. Here's her phone number. You can call her and set up a meeting and that made my day so happy. She was trying since 2017 before she got in contact with me, to find me and get together, she knows I'm her mother, but she also knows those other people that she calls mother and father.

Carly's daughter had been adopted by a couple when she was an infant. She laments the time she has missed with her biological daughter and discloses to me, "Yeah, which was supposed to be an open adoption back then. The judge ordered that, but I don't think they followed the rules." Perhaps yet another example of how Carly's presentation serves to *story-o-type* and marginalize her. If an arrangement was made for an open adoption, why would Carly be prevented from having that condition honoured?

Strained Family Relationships: "We should be there for each other"

Marginalized voices are not empowered to speak-up; silenced for so long, it can be intimidating to find the confidence to self-advocate. To this point, I asked Carly, "Did you know

how to advocate back when you were younger? Or do you feel that you had someone to go to when you were younger?” Carly went on to explain a bit about her family dynamic, and while her father was approachable and supportive, her relationship with her mother was strained. She answers my questions with, “No, no, no, just my parents, my dad, because I would go and talk to him. I couldn't go to my mother because she was just mean and disgusting, but rest in peace.” Carly then mentions a quote from her collage, “discovering my dreams,” to preface the following thoughts on how her father’s dream became her own. She conveys,

One of my dreams was, before my dad had passed away in 2011, which is almost 13 years ago now ... his dream was for me to have a grandchild for him, so that happened. Which now I have a lovely daughter that's 23. So, he wanted to see a grandchild in the family so ... so that's why I chose that little saying.

Carly then moves into a commentary about her brother. This relationship adds another layer of complication to Carly’s life given the difficulty and estrangement between them. She explains their separation as she offers:

Now my brother, well he could be good, and he could be mean ... Sometimes he goes and says I don't have a sister anymore. I mean, I don't know. I'm his older sister, but that makes me feel ... it's not right; there's the two of us left. He should be there for me and I'm trying my best to do things and do my best to help him. But he just ... It's hard when somebody pushes you away. He needs help too. I admit that; help just like I do, but he's gotta realize that we're the only two left in each other's life. We should be there for each other. He's been told that. But now I got my friend's family that's there for me and stuff, and where I am living now ...

Outside-in/Inside-out Story: Friends are Family (Adult Years)

Luckily, Carly has found her way with the help, support, and accompaniment of neighbors who have become good friends. Her friends have served as the stability she needed to fully be herself. She has found support and comfort with them as they have become her family.

Carly shares this with me as she reveals:

A woman and her family; She's a bus driver. She drives the Metro Halifax Transit, and her family, her sister and her children and grandchildren, they call me Auntie [Carly] and I'm like their sister. We've been close for fifteen or sixteen years.

That said, while close with her neighbours, Carly is closest to her dog, Angel. A valued member of her family, she points out a picture of herself with her dog on her collage, as she tells me, "There's me with my dog, Angel, she likes to cuddle and be close to me ... Yeah, she likes get under the blankets, right up on one side of me when I'm sleeping. Right there [pointing to her side]." She concludes her commentary on her dog by telling me how much her dog brings her comfort, as she says, "She's there every time. She's right there."

Inside- Story/Inside-out Story: Supported/Comforted by Spirituality and Volunteerism

Carly has many community involvements and has found solace and happiness by being of service to others in her community. Her perception of success is very much tied to the care she offers to everyone around her. She explains her many community pursuits and volunteerism as she discloses:

I'm involved in church... [pointing to a book on her collage that portrays an image of a Bible]. Yeah, now I help with Sunday school. When that starts back up because we're working on it. Because of COVID things, everything stopped. And the nursery, I'm involved with children and stuff. And then I'm involved sometimes with this after school

program and there are parties and setting up that when the kids come in for the parties, so I am on call for that. And then we now do ...I don't know if you've seen the poster on the fridge ...we now set up the Sunday market thing. I'm involved in setting tables up for that. Taking them down. Yeah, I'm on call. I use to work at the soup kitchen down on Ochterloney Street.... But they're only open for takeout now, so I can't be in there to help get things set up because they're not open for that ... so I'm on call when that comes back.

Inside-out Story: Themes of Resilience, Helping Others, Finding Freedom to be Herself

Carly has very deliberately decided to embrace the positive in her adult life as she claims, "... once I left the negative and moved into the positive, I felt like I'm more helpful and special and 'precious.'" She then she refers to the phrase on her collage, "Give wildly lost people good direction." She references the phrase and calls attention to the arrows pointing in different directions, as she expresses, "So now I felt like I was giving suggestions to people around me. And so I picked that because it has arrows going different ways." Carly continues, by telling me she has, "more freedom now," drawing from a phrase she has selected and placed on her collage. She also mentions, "discovering the endless positives," as she tells me she is "happy" and "joyful" spending her time giving to others and her community. In fact, she claims by following her interest in helping people she has found her own personal "freedom" to be her true self. This was followed by my question, "What do you think your gift is?" To which she so humbly and graciously responds with:

Just helping others. I am also involved at Christmas time with Salvation Army – out there in the public doing the Christmas kettles. And this year, well, soon as they get back to me, I wanna help at the place that I help on the weekends. What we've been doing is making up [hampers] for families that are in need; like Christmas hampers for them and

delivering them. That makes me feel good and happy inside to see their faces when they receive that. Just the food in the box and maybe a gift for the kids. Let's say I deliver a food box to you and to just see your face and your reactions ...I wanna get more involved with the Salvation Army, to see if they need help doing their hampers, handing them out and stuff.

It seems Carly's resilience and purpose surpassed the negative experiences she had in public school. I offer her the supportive comment, "You're very involved and you think of others. You're very thoughtful of other's needs." She politely responds with, "That's what they tell me." And then follows with, "... back in school they wouldn't help me as much, but I looked beyond that, and say I want to help others."

Hands-on Learning are Expressed in Carly's Interests and Hobbies, Subjects in School

As we continue our conversation, Carly also shows her creative side to accompany her love of helping others. Her collage, filled with vibrant colours, expresses her love of nature and beauty. Carly offers commentary on her creative side as she states, "And then the art, because I like to paint bird houses and wooden things. So, birdhouses and stuff." This begins a dialogue between us about her artistic predisposition and her desire to engage with making art. I comment on this feature of Carly's collage, by saying, "So can I ask ... you are a very creative?" She responds with, "Yeah, now" I ask, "Well, do you think you were back then but you" She answers my question before I fully finish by saying, "Probably didn't know it." As Carly has grown, she has found more of herself and has discovered her true interests. I suggest this by saying, "You've found more, as you've grown, about who you are and what your interests are." To which she confirms, "Yeah, yeah."

Wanting to go deeper into Carly's interest in art and creativity while she was in public school, I asked her, "So you're very creative. Did you feel that you had those opportunities when you were in high school?" She responds with, "No, once I came to join the two mental health programs, then I realized I have the opportunities and that I can do things." I responded by offering, "So it's given you a way forward. That you feel confident in doing things. Did you have that before now? Carly meets me with the response, "No, not until I started other programs."

Curious about whether Carly had the opportunity to find her interests in public school, I asked "Did you have an interest back then when you were in school? Did you know what your interests were?" She responded with, "No. When I got home and just away from all the other people and just to be with my family and do whatever." When I pressed her with another question, asking what her hobbies were in youth, however, she responded with several interests, such playing pool, camping, swimming, and fishing. And, as I listened to Carly list off her interests, my thought was how they are all physical or kinetic, hands-on activities. It has been my experience as a school counsellor that often those students who are inclined toward physical or hands-on activities struggle the most with theoretical learning, thus they can sometimes struggle in public school given its heavy theoretical orientation. It seemed that Carly did gravitate to the available hands-on classes and subjects while at school and, even today. As she later advised me that her favorite subjects in school were, "taking a break from work, and going to gym class." When I asked her, "What did you like about gym?" Not surprisingly she offered:

Yeah, it's the activities that I enjoyed; that was in elementary. Then I enjoyed, when I got into junior high, I enjoyed the woodworking, the sewing, the cooking, the metal work, and all that. And then actually we had, once a week, we had a bus come and take us and

we would go to the Sportsplex or somewhere for swimming lessons. I enjoy getting out of the school and away from it ...

Indeed, then, and now, hands-on physical learning opportunities and classes are very positive pursuits for Carly. She needs active engagement to sustain her interests. She also noted that while in public school she enjoyed "...the part where we had the babies ...the baby would go off and you would have to take care of it." Carly's mention of her Family Studies class back then is a theme that has continued over her life. As her story shows, she has a genuine interest in nurturing others; it is an authentic quality that she fully embraces and expresses as she lives her life today.

Embracing the Positive: Bright Colours, Adult Education, Meditation, Art, Mental Health

Carly's passion for people has propelled her toward feelings of contentment and excitement. She very deliberately spends her time trying to look for what makes her happy so that she can share her happiness with others. She has showcased her happiness by the display of bright colours throughout her collage as she relays, "But then the bright colors brighten my day, and the next day, and everything, so that's why I added some colour." And Carly has likewise found her happiness through her adult education program and all the self-care habits they have helped her develop. She spoke of her gratitude around the programming she is now involved in, as she explains,

Now when I started the program, and the meditation, and the art stuff like this, we're doing projects on mental health and how we story on that. We've had guest speakers online, so we were online for that and that focuses on mental health and listening to their stories, and they remind me of my stories. That's why I chose this one [referring to her collage] as she points to her collage. Carly draws my attention to a picture of a woman

who is meditating on a table, as she explains, “Yeah, that's what we focus on our Monday afternoons. And programs when we're back in person we do a meditation, called ‘stress away.’ So the bad stuff that happened to you is behind you and focus on the good, positive stuff.”

Advice for the School System

To close my conversation with Carly, I was eager to hear her impressions of what she felt was missing from her public school experience. My initial question was, “What do you think you needed when you were in high school then that you didn’t get?” Carly responds by addressing the bullying she faced as she reflects, “Some other resources to help me like trying to get away from the fighting and the bullying and how they would treat me in school.” From this initial response I followed with another question which then led to the following exchange:

Investigator: Okay, and did you feel like a teacher intervened to help you with bullying? Did people know you were being bullied?

Carly: All the teachers watched it but... no, back then they didn't do anything. Now there's still some places not doing anything. They couldn't care less. They'll teach the kids their work and then once they leave, then ... [shrug shoulders].

Investigator: I have some other questions ...what messages have been offered to you without your consent? What do you think the teachers were telling you when you had those feelings of discouragement? What do you think that meant to you, or what messages did that send?

Carly: I felt like I was a nobody.

Investigator? Do you still feel that?

Carly: Not anymore. I'm involved in a lot of other things...

Investigator: Advice for the school system? Thinking about how you felt, what would you want to tell the school system? How would you want it to change?

Carly: They should be more involving. At least give ...Well, they can't do that. These days there's about 30 students in one class or something now. But if there was like 10 to 20 each ... take time to talk to your students and see how you can help.

Resilience is Fostered by Strengths-based Environment

I am sure Carly's message of smaller class sizes and the opportunity to provide more personalized service would receive resounding support from all teachers and school personnel in schools today. And as for Carly, she has shown great resilience, which is confirmed with a vibrant and beautiful collage to mirror and express the vibrant and beautiful life she has created for herself. Carly concludes by suggesting that the dark picture seen in the left corner of her collage is placed there intentionally to illustrate her feelings around wanting to "...go hide in the corner," in response to the prejudice she received and how she felt marginalized in public-school. Yet, the majority of her collage is influenced by images affirming life, in celebration of the natural beauty that surrounds her. A gentle reminder that education is more than just how well one can perform on a test. Perhaps the greatest test and success can be achieved by living in the moment, being your authentic self, and establishing connection with others, or as Carly would say, "just helping others... that makes me feel good and happy inside"

Ella's Story

Figure 6

Ella's Collage



Ella is a 41-year-old female from Dartmouth, Nova Scotia who is currently enrolled in a local Adult Learning Network program to earn her GED. Ella struggled while in public school due to having “learning disabilities” which impacted her ability to read and communicate. She was placed on a full Individual Program Plan (IPP) while she was in public school and she experienced bullying and prejudice from her peers and those in the system due to her struggles with reading and learning. Ella has Mi’kmaq ancestry, and she is now learning about her culture after feeling somewhat separated from her indigeneity in youth.

Outside-In Story: Bullied in School, Full IPP; “It made me feel like I was out of place”

Ella starts her school story by telling me that she has experienced bullying while attending public school. She discloses, “A lot of students and three teachers that I had bullied me when I was in school.” Ella goes on to explain how her learning challenges resulted in her being

placed on a full IPP, which contributed to her educational stratification. Ella explains that she was in "... IPP classes [and] they used to make fun of me because I couldn't read." Ella makes this distinction to preface her selection of a picture depicting "a man getting pulled by two bulls." Ella conveys that she chose this picture because the image relates to:

... being bullied, he's being pulled by them. It's almost like being bullied by people by pushing you or saying wrong things towards you or anything like that. People can stop doing that. They just have to learn how to stand up for themselves as well.

As Ella tells her story as an adult, she is obviously empowered to stand up for herself by speaking her personal truth. In her youth, however, she was met with negative *story-o-typing* given her learning challenges with reading and writing. As a result, she received abusive statements and judgements from others as she clarifies, "My classmates and ... my teachers made fun of me because I couldn't read and write properly." Yet, the words flowed effortlessly from Ella on the day of our conversation as she expounded upon her initial comments. She goes deeper into the upset and despair she felt as she struggled with reading, as she conveys:

It made me feel like I was out of place, like most of the words that people are saying are new to my ears... like I never heard them before. Like I never heard the word, 'transportation,' for example, and all this other stuff before. I decided, okay, this is enough. I'm going to learn this stuff. That's why I'm happy I got a laptop now. It helps me out with a lot of stuff.

Today, as Ella undertakes study and preparation for her adult education exam, she has the help of technology; her laptop serving to assist her with understanding words in order to communicate with ease. But back in public-school she admits to feeling "out of place" as she advises, "It's more.... 'learn, learn yourself' was the message" she received. Evidently, Ella

struggled to find the help she needed to learn. She continues, “Like mostly, some words I couldn't get out unless I asked somebody to help me get them out or help me break them down to understand the words.” She goes on to say, “I couldn't read properly ... all of my classes, I was on an IPP because I had a learning disability.” Ella then goes on to explain how she was picked on by the staff and students, as she provides the following account of how she was taunted and provoked by a teacher while reading at school:

I got picked on by the staff and the students. And once one teacher did it once and then he stopped because I stood up and I said, ‘you make fun of me again, I’m gonna throw the book right in your face.’ I was trying to pronounce the word out, and he didn't like it, so he made fun of me. He was taking the words and tried to make me say them into sentences, but every time that I tried to put them into sentences, he made fun of me. And I have a hard time trying to say ‘sentences,’ because the S almost sounds like a C to me. It was more how he approached me with his words ...Um, how can I? I need an example ... okay, if I went in the room and grabbed my, like my binder and all that stuff to take to go to my other class, he would be making fun of me saying, ‘your disability, you can't even freaking read, blah, blah, blah.’ It was hard on me because I was trying to learn how to read. But since I had a teacher always nagging on me about it, I think that's why my reading is poor.

Outside-in/Inside-out Story: Hesitancy to Communicate Stems from Lingering Insecurity and Public-school Messaging

To Ella's point, I did pick up on her initial hesitancy to articulate her thoughts as we began our research conversation. She indicated several times throughout the early phase of the research process that she did not want to get the exercise wrong or “give the wrong answer.” Hearing this,

I advised “there is no right or wrong here, this is your story.” As I reflected on her preliminary hesitancy and insecurity the day of our meeting, my mind went back to the statement she offered early in the conversation when she said, “they used to make fun of me because I could not read.” My sense was that Ella was concerned with making a mistake or perhaps having her words negatively scrutinized; the negative memories from her childhood still plaguing her today. Of course, I did not push her for more in-depth information as my aim in facilitating this research was to accompany her and to make her feel safe as she told her story. I took a trauma informed approach while working with her to ensure that our conversation was truly anti-oppressive and appreciative in nature. It was easier to have Ella speak to her school story by reflecting on her collage images, rather than the words and quotes she had chosen and placed on her collage. This approach worked out beautifully and allowed Ella to naturally offer her impressions of being *story-o-typed* while attending public-school. To have her read the quotes and provide feedback on her use of them created an unease in Ella and perhaps was serving to re-traumatize her given her named insecurity with reading and pronunciation of words.

Negativity Breeds More Negativity but Resilience Prevails

Ella goes on to give an account of a time when a student started teasing her about wearing glasses and how her teacher needed to intervene. It seems Ella had to stand up for herself with her peers as well, as she describes, the student taunting her with, “‘four eyes, four eyes, needs glasses to see.’ [She] said, ‘I’d rather be a four-eyed dork than a two-eyed prick.’ Teacher came over tapped me on the shoulder. He said, ‘you said what?’ He was shocked over what I said.” She goes on to explain her logic for standing up for herself, as she offers, “Yeah, I didn't really like negativity towards me because I thought if negativity was towards me then I'm allowed to put it back out.” As Ella has grown older, however, she tries to be more positive

toward others and gentler on herself, as she admits, “But I taught myself to try to do it in a different way without being negative ... to kill negative with kindness.” This is a great example of how *outside-in* messages or *story-o-typing* can ultimately compel someone toward wanting better, thus the *inside* and *inside-out* story changes for the better – an example of choice and resilience in this case.

Outside-in Story/Inside Story: Family Issues/Bullied by Brother

The theme of bullying extended into Ella’s family. She had a strained relationship with one of her brothers which created more tension for her, further complicating an already difficult life and leading her to leave school when her high school years were beginning. Ella explains, “I didn't finish grade 10. I didn't really want to go back to school at grade 10 because the fact is that I was getting bullied by my brother.” I asked her for clarification by saying, “By your brother?” She continues,

By my brother in high school. I had a lot of family issues going on and ... This is [not] my older brother, he is there for me. I live with my older brother. But my third oldest brother is in Toronto or Truro ... It doesn't bother me any because he's not around me now. That's the way I see it, if they're not here.

As I listened to Ella’s brief statement about her brother, I was hesitant to dive deeper into that aspect of her story out of caution that more trauma was buried there. I continued by sticking to the line of her school story, and followed with, “So you went to grade 10 and then what happened after grade 10?” She responded with, “I didn't go back because they said that I was a certain age that I couldn't go in that school. I was over the age of what they allow I think it was 21.”

Inside Story/Inside-out Story: “I felt really out of place”

Looking for a program to obtain her high school diploma, Ella enrolled in a local learning network (not her current program) and again she offers, “I felt really out of place ... I didn’t feel like I belonged – anywhere.” It took Ella some time before finding a program that met her needs, and in the interim she claims,

I used to go into a lot of schools. I moved to Newfoundland and back to Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. It was kinda hard on a person to go back and forth, especially moving. But I'm happy that I'm back in this program because they've been helping me with more than what I expect. It's a shock.

Before arriving at her current learning network, Ella struggled to find the help she needed to learn. She reveals, “I tried to help myself to learn, but I still have my learning disability. I do have that, but I've been doing okay but I didn’t have somebody to help me.” Things did change for her, however, and she is now enrolled in programming to obtain her GED. She credits her current learning network with helping her feel supported and “welcomed.”

Adult High School: Finding support; Reframing of Outside-in Story Creates New Inside Story (Inside-out Story)

Ella enthusiastically describes the merits of her current learning network and credits them with giving her the encouragement and support she needed to build her confidence as she “takes her steps” toward learning and achieving her GED. She considers her current network to be like family, as she explains:

I'm happy that I'm back in this program because the group up here is my family at the [name redacted] Learning Network. I find they brought me in, and they welcomed me in and said, ‘we will help you learn how to do your stuff again.’ And that's what they've been doing. They've been doing really well with me. I wrote something about my cat,

poetry. I have it in my classroom right now to share with everybody. My cat was the main thing in my life that made me feel comfortable with myself. But now since she's gone, I have my classmates now and the awesome staff people at [name redacted] Learning Network helping me and guiding me through this.

Supportive Instructors

Ella further elaborates on her newfound family at her learning network by talking about the close relationships she has established with her instructors. Her impressions and feelings about her instructors are depicted within the visual elements displayed over her collage; they represent specific teachers. She starts with her math teacher as she indicates, “The little, my bird over here that has a treehouse, that's my math teacher, [name redacted].” She then moves on to “the cross” on her collage as she explains the overall feeling she has for her current situation. She reveals, “the cross is more for all the love that I have around me that's making me feel better about myself. And I'm kind of happy that I'm here [participant tearful when saying this].” Ella then moves on to describe another teacher, [name redacted], as she shares,

She's always been there. And the fairy that I picked out too, I see that as [name redacted]. I'm more happy about my future. So, the fairy is my teacher. They [my current teachers] make me feel better about myself because they're not putting me down like how those teachers used to put me down in my lifetime. There's more positive from the staff I have around me now. The staff that I have are bomb ... the [name redacted] Learning Network has the bomb as staff and students.

Adult Education Program: Positivity Builds Trust

Ella further develops her beliefs on the importance of positivity and how this approach has helped her, as she states:

In this program is my trust because they're not negative about anything, they always show positive about how we should have our life. And they're trying to improve our life with us. And they're kind of like, not really like pushing us, pushing us, they're trying to guide us the way, how we should go, and I kind of like this place.

Student-centred: Learning is Paced by the Student

Ella describes how self-paced and strengths-based teaching methods, as well as coaching from her instructors, have nurtured her self-confidence and inspired a love of learning. These approaches have helped her heal her traumas and the emotional injuries sustained when she was young. Ella explains how she has taken charge of her life, guided by her teachers. And admittedly for Ella, she does not feel pushed in some sort of rapid dash to get through the curriculum as quickly as possible. Instead she is permitted to take her time in learning, to create a solid foundation for success before moving on to the next step in her learning. Again, Ella speaks to this point as she offers:

Life can be tough. But it can be easier if you make your steps. Everybody doesn't.

I'm doing my steps and I'm mostly achieving one thing at a time. It takes time for a lot of things to come through. And I'm proud of myself and my family is proud of me because I'm doing the right things now [said tearfully].

Inside Story: Memories Remain; “I can’t do anything right”

Like Mary and Carly, Ella, too is haunted by her past school story. It causes her distress to this day. She flashes back to her experience in public school, to the *story-o-typing* she faced and endured, as she recounts:

When I was growing up, I used to get teased on what I wear ... and teachers torturing me saying that ‘I'm no good’ or ‘I can't do anything right.’ And I'm like trying to figure out

what they're trying to talk about, but there was a lot of miscommunications on a lot of things.

It seems these memories, while suppressed much of the time, are close to the surface for Ella and easily accessible. She easily revisits the negativity and people from her past as their words and actions reside in her memory. Indeed, negativity hangs on and clings to her. She knows what it feels like to be bullied, and she calls for change:

And now in this day and age, I wish it would stop. On what's going on with students because the fact is – how can we really approach other people when we don't even know how to be positive towards them? To be good you gotta find that goodness in you to show to other people. If you don't have that in you, then why are you on this earth to make other people feel bad about themselves? ... I wish the teachers were a little bit more easier with their students and especially if they have a learning disability.

Ella's inference on the power of positivity makes an important statement here which speaks to the impact disparaging comments had on her life. The advice she offers when she communicates, "To be good you gotta find that goodness in you to show to other people." This comment inadvertently points to the importance of harnessing individual strengths to build confidence. It likewise highlights the merits of asset-based pedagogies to help students find their confidence through an accession of their strengths; to help them build a positive identity and to help them advance positively in school and in life. Asset or strengths-based pedagogies are trauma informed and they work well to alleviate learning distress because students are distanced from the criticism and scrutiny they often encounter as they have been so often taught and conditioned through deficit-oriented pedagogies.

Inside-out Story: Ella's Advice for the School System

Seeking more wisdom from Ella stemming from her lived experience in the public school system, I asked her, "If you were to give the school system advice on how to be with children or what you needed, what advice would you give to the school system for change?" Ella responds with, "Be a little bit more easier with other students. They should be ... easier with students than what they are." Looking for clarification, I ask, "And what do you mean by easier?" She elaborates as she continues:

If they start anything, let them go to the bathroom or call their parents to let them know about anything. If they're being bullied, then stop the bullying for one; that gotta stop completely anyways. Being bullied, it's still going on. Take those 250 kids ... in my eyes. The Mi'kmaq or the natives ... all those kids that got killed. They were bullied in my eyes.

Outside-in Messaging: Historic Trauma from Residential Schools

Ella speaks of the children who were victims of the residential school system, as she offers, "Those people were my kind." She has been paying attention to the unfolding story where unmarked mass graves have found hundreds of buried Indigenous children across Canada. Her undoubted internalization of the trauma imposed on those who hold Indigenous ancestry, her own culture, informs her perspective while it influences her personal account of school experience. She elaborates:

Yeah, they were being bullied by the teachers really. If they were taking the students and doing that to them, then that's being bullied. They shouldn't have, they shouldn't have. Now our older generation wants to take our lives and go back the way they used to be

[referring to reclaiming their indigeneity and seeking accountability for historical wrongs].

As Ella makes her point about “taking their lives and go[ing] back to the way they used to be,” her point is further underscored as I ask, “Can you explain your Indigenous heritage a bit more?” Ella responds with, “Um, we're learning about that so, I gotta wait on that honey.” It is with this response, sheepishly offered by Ella, that I learn through her first-hand account how the colonialization of Canada has stripped Indigenous peoples of their cultural connection and understanding of their language and identity. Ella had not learned about her culture in her youth or in the school system because the curriculum had been sanitized to remove all perspectives and histories that fell outside of colonial rule. This is a first-hand demonstration, through Ella’s personal account, of the damage done to Indigenous peoples as their cultural identity in this regard has been made inaccessible.

Ella’s Natural Traits were Squashed and Extinguished

As Ella continues her story, she reiterates how she “felt like she was out of place in public school.” She attributes much of this feeling to the staff, as she suggests, “Yeah, because of some of the staff that were running the school were not really appropriate ... because half of the time they were so negative that they would send us home for no reason at all.” I follow her statement by asking, “Why do you think they were negative?” Ella offers her idea; “Probably because they had a bad day and they put it all on us?” I ask her, “That’s how you felt?” Ella responds:

That’s how I felt, out of place, because when they felt negativity, I try to make them feel better about themselves and say, ‘Hey come on, let’s do this.’ I was more lovable and outspoken without ever having a negative way about it.

Outside-in Story Translates into Inside-out Responses: Words and Actions Matter

From Ella's account, it seemed her lightheartedness was not appreciated by her teachers. Perhaps it was difficult for them to motivate her and thus they grew frustrated. I then ask her, "How did they respond to that?" She advises, "They didn't know how to respond. They just told me to go home half of the time." Curious about her statement, I asked, "Were you expelled from school or did you leave on your own?" She responds with, "A few times I left on my own and sometimes I did get expelled because I told the teacher to F off." Wondering why Ella would choose to respond with an aggressive word directed at her teacher, I asked, "And you told the teacher to F off because?" She explains, "He was saying the wrong words to me." Looking for more clarification, I ask, "What were the wrong words?" She responds with:

Negative, it was always negative. It never felt positive, the way ... how we spoke [referring to our research conversation and the rapport that we had in conversation].

It's just the way, how you approach is like, what I was trying to explain ... If you show with a positive face then you get positive back, but if you show negative with a negative attitude, then you're just going to get negative right at you. It's a kind of a person's balance of themselves ... Sometimes teachers did show a positive way towards me ... how they spoke. The way they lift the lip or, you know, certain little things that judge ... a trigger inside. To me they would say, okay, you're talking too negative ... Okay, I gotta leave, like I gotta go. Bye, I'm off.

Outside-in/Inside-story: Body-language; Communication can be Seen and Heard

Picking up on the theme of body-language that presented over Mary's story, we also see how the interpretation of body-language is likewise present in Ella's story. As Ella conveys, "The way they lift the lip or you know certain little things that judge ..." she was looking for

indicators of trust, but seemed to be met with contempt and negativity, from her standpoint. I comment by saying, “So you kind of picked up on some negative stuff there ... body-language.”

Ella expounds on her use of body-language, used as a gauge to establish an impression of someone, as she relays,

I could pick up on it. I know a lot of things about, like body language, because Papa told me a lot of things about body language. So, I learned the hard way. I got taught by an old man that did good with me and I loved my Papa. He liked showing positive and not negative.

Outside-in/Inside-out Story: Listening Helps to Build Trust

As Ella continues, she speaks about the importance of establishing trust with her teachers and how this trust translated into feeling safe with them allowing learning to happen with ease and fluidity. She speaks of creating a bond with her teacher to necessitate a relationship of understanding and trust. She mentions at this point in our conversation that she felt close to her gym teacher while in public school, as she speaks of the “bond” they had between them. She felt welcomed in his space, as she remembers, “I felt a bond between me and him, just like that. So that's why I got more along with him” Wanting a bit more from Ella, I asked, “And was it how they presented to you? Like was it their energy? What would build that trust for you? Or, what do you think you need to build trust with someone?” She responds with, “Just listening to them [the students], it's just the listening.” She then points out how the energy of the teacher makes a difference, as she cites “...it's them how they approach their selves towards me.”

Outside-in Story: Teacher Assistance/Mentorship

Ella illustrates the importance of building and having trust in relationships as she goes deeper into explaining the positive qualities and merits of her relationship with her beloved gym

teacher. Ella reports her closeness with him was due to his open and inviting nature, as she describes their cheerful and upbeat relationship:

Me and my gym teacher always got along ...I loved him. Like, if I had a problem or couldn't run or anything, he would tell me to, 'Go sit. Go sit up on the bench.' He was like, 'Go on, get! Don't you want to do nothing, just go,' in a nice way. He never said it in the wrong way or anything like that. He's like, 'Okay, get, get, go, go, sit down kid, get.' He always had a smile on his face when he expresses his words. But some teachers don't know how to do that. Expression with the words, with a smile, without showing the rudeness of the face. To show a smile with kindness ... Like, when my teacher told me to kill hate-ness with kindness, it kind of dawned on me. Okay, well I'm going to be kind and let's see what happens.

Ella's gym teacher was a role model for her. It has been more than twenty years, and the advice that he shared, and his demonstration of kindness has left a lasting impression; she has carried his example with her all this time and even today it serves to guide and comfort her. It is the power of a positive and supportive relationship. And while he told her "Get, go sit down," he does so with a smile on his face. Again, highlighting that tone and intention can often be linked with body language. Ella goes on to say that her gym teacher had time for her and helped her work through her problems, as she discloses:

My gym teacher was always the one that helped me out with a lot of things. Like, if I had a problem, I can go talk to him about it. And then he'll go talk to the principal about it. I felt safer with him than I did with the teachers, principal, vice-principal, anybody ...

Trust Issues: Her Cat, Ninin, is Her Best Friend and “Spirit Guide”

While Ella has positive role models in her life, such as her former gym teacher, her father, and her brother, she is typically wary about establishing relationships with people because, as she says, “... We don't even know which way they're going to come from. Are they going to turn on us very quickly or are they going to stab us in the back or we don't know.” Thus, Ella considers animals and her cat to be her best friend and faithful companion, as she shares, “I have more trust with animals than I do with humans” Ella, however, has been struggling of late because her best friend and cat, Ninin, passed away over the past year. While she has been lost without her cat, she believes her spirit is still very much present with her, guiding her forward in life. Ella shares:

...there was one person, well, one animal that made me keep myself going forward with my life. That's why in spirit she's right here. Her name was Ninin ... like the engine, like how it goes. Like how Harley Davidson sounds like when you start it. She used to run around in the house, so I thought she was a little motor that couldn't be stopped.

As Ella speaks of her deceased cat, her emotions heighten, and she tells me she wrote two poems as a tribute to her cat and the important role she still plays in her life. She has entitled the first poem, “*To My Cat, Ninin,*” and it reads:

Roses are red, stars are white,
 The love we share will never die.
 Over the mountains our love will shine together,
 As two spirits glide through the night and day.
 The love we shared as two truthful spirits,
 Stay together as one.
 You'll always be in my heart,
 Please come back to me into a different form,
 Our love can shine once more,
 My heart is so alone without having your love surrounding me once more.
 I love you, I miss you.
 My baby girl, Ninin,

Rest in peace.

I hope to see you again because you made my world go around with love.

Her second poem is entitled, “*Happy Memories.*” Ella wrote it for her cat and she advised me, “She [Ninin] asked me to write on the happy memory...this is one part that maybe [will] help people to understand where I'm coming from ... to show more love to an animal than I do for humans.”

After six months that passed by, I've been thinking about the memories that we shared together the last 14 years ...

I'll never forget about you because you were more than just an animal towards me.

You were more.

You were more like my soulmate.

But no human. And also, a lot more that comes with life.

Every day that goes by,

I'll always miss you and never forget about the happy memories that we shared together as two friends can be.

I gotta be strong for both of us and now keep moving forward.

And even live a little when my heart is alone without having you around my surroundings.

I miss you, I love you, Ninin.

Rest in peace.

Animals are close to Ella's heart. With her cat bringing the most comfort in life, Ella continues by telling me about her beliefs and practices from the perspective of her culture and how nature plays a role in guiding her with gentle wisdom and a knowing that spirit is there for her when others are not. She speaks of her cat, Ninin, again and then describes how spirit is represented through wildlife and in the messages that nature can bring to support and encourage. She explains,

But my love is with my cat because she's been with me for 14 years [and recently deceased]. She's been on my side even when my brother was alone. She was there. She was always my guide. Even when she's not here now, that's why you see my spirit; she's my spirit bird [depicted on her collage]. Because, seeing a relative, especially with

someone that just passed away is a good sign. Even if you see a hummingbird, a dragonfly, or even a butterfly. A butterfly, dragonfly, even birds are all spirits that come out of anybody. It's my guide. It's my guide helping me to pull through a lot of things.

Outside-in/Inside Story: Spirituality/Mi'kmaq Culture and Knowledge

Ella attributes her resiliency to her cultural perspective on life and the connection she feels with nature and her surroundings. She takes in her surroundings and the messages that come from interacting with nature. Nature is her wise counsel as she often speaks of her connection to the spirit realm, which has served to steady and guide her when times were difficult. She explains, "I had somebody on my shoulder guiding me, my spirit guide. I'll say it that way. My spirit guide showed me to do the right things and not the wrong. I try to do the right things."

Inside-out Story: Resiliency Prevails

With the comfort brought by her connection to spirit, and with her belief in herself, Ella has evolved through her adult years and feels resilient and brave in the face of difficulty. She explains, "I am brave to face anything that is dangerous because I don't have a scare in me anymore. The only one scare I have in me is a bullet in my head. That's it. I have no scare for anything else." Ella has also learned that it is through positivity and her love for herself and others that carries her forward and gives her purpose in life. She has come through to now empowered, as she exclaims,

I do have a heart. As like, what a lot of people said, 'if you shut down the heart you shut down me.' If you don't want my love then my love can go out the door and they'll go with along with me ...

She goes on to convey the happiness she has by taking in the messages from her surroundings as she taps into spirit and feels the power and guidance from a higher place. She offers,

It's a warm feeling when somebody has that gift ... to share towards another person that doesn't really know a lot of things about spirits, but I do. I'm a Mi'kmaq and that's what happens. Ma'kmaq Indians can feel that, and that's the name of my people, Mi'kmaq.

Inside/Inside-out Story: Wanting to Help Others; “Being around positive people, I feel like I'm saved”

Through the living of her life to now, and with the experiences of her childhood, Ella has discovered her innate goodness and her desire to help others. She enthusiastically proclaims, “If anybody needs help, I'm there. That's my future.” Ella takes pride in being helpful and it is something that she claims has saved her, as she shares:

I'm in the shock that I can help people. But, (pause) how come I can't really help myself on certain things? [said tearfully]. Being around positive people, I feel like I'm saved ... Like say, if somebody was in a lot of pain and they don't know what to do, I can do what I can do best to help guide them through. But I can't force them to do anything unless they want to help themselves. Everybody has been asking me to go on the Helpline.

Ella embodies someone who very naturally is tuned into the emotional side of people. She is empathic and can intuit when someone is hurting or needs support. She emphasizes this inclination by her participation on this project, and her desire to help others, as she offers the following to me:

It's making me feel more of a positive person than a negative person. If I was turned to a negative person, then I wouldn't do this [referring to participating in this research project]. I would have said, ‘sorry I don't have my time to spare or to waste your time on doing this.’ But I took my time to get this done because I would like to have other people see how other people had their life.

As I witness Ella's story, what stands out for me is the strength and resilience exhibited during difficult times; I see the survival of hope and the human spirit. Despite the difficulty and the *story-o-typing* received in school, Ella has chosen to be positive about life. She demonstrates resistance to negativity and buoyancy through living her life and the choices she makes day-to-day to be happy. She emphasizes being of service to others. I offer her the following statement and question in recognition of her resiliency, "It sounds like the messages you received [from public school] they haven't stopped you; it seems like they're propelling you forward in a positive way, would you say? To which Ella replies, "That is. I'm not going to deny, that it is. I agree, I agree."

Inside Story: Happiness is the Goal

It seems that through the mentorship of her gym teacher and her own desire for success and happiness, Ella has sustained through the many difficult moments over her life to now. Despite the negative *story-o-typing* and messaging she received while in public-school, she luckily has a counter narrative where she likewise received messaging in support of her potential. Consequently, she has sustained by positive influence and by those who saw her inner worth and potential as a person. Positive support of Ella helped her proceed and build momentum on her journey as she reached for a better life. Indeed, it has been more than twenty-years since Ella has been in school, but she still recalls the kindness of her gym teacher. It is a powerful reminder how just one person can make such a difference in someone's life. In Ella's own words she explains,

He was a really nice teacher, we got along. I couldn't get over it because he knew what I was going through because probably he went through exactly the same thing, and we don't even know it. And everything was more of a big shock towards me because the fact

is that I was trying to change myself. But other people were trying to make me go back down that pathway, but I didn't want to put myself down that pathway. So, I brought myself up, took my own stepping stones, and saluted the world I try not to cause anybody no problems. If you feel bad, I try to take that pain out of you and I make you laugh. When I can make somebody laugh to get myself out of that way of downness. It brings me right back out of the downness and bring me right up and cheerful and all this crazy stuff that I like doing sometimes out of happiness. But it's not in a bad way or anything. I just like to be happy seeing people happy.

As Ella offers this sentiment of positivity, it is clear she has chosen to embrace life from a very optimistic place. In recognition of Ella's innate grit and resourcefulness, I ask, "The messages that you've received or that were given to you without your consent, you don't hold on to them anymore or do you? Ella's response offers hope and fosters faith that despite what happens in life, difficulties can be taken in as information propelling someone toward making positive change. Indeed, personal difficulty can serve to inform our decisions and take us into alternative directions, refining definitions of Self, providing clarity and reframing of our preferred life and who we are, or who we become in present and future versions of Self. She shares:

Why would I hold onto a judge that can't even barely be there all the time? They're not there to judge me all the time, so why should I hold on to the judge? Whatever happens in the past can stay in the past. I move up ... They say your past is your past. That only makes you stronger. Work on towards your future and go on and see what happens towards the future. What happened from the past is only going to make you a stronger person in the future.

I respond to Ella's wise commentary with, "Your identity is one of positivity and strength, and just one day at a time and getting to where you're going." She agrees by saying, "Yeah, why should I rush? It's just not going to get to me anywhere quicker so I'm just going to lollygag and take my time. That's a happy way." As Ella and I finish our conversation, I ask one final question, "And what is your future in your in your mind or in your words?" She responds by sharing, "My future is whatever comes next. I don't know exactly, it just happens."

CHAPTER SEVEN: THEMES AND PATTERNS EMERGING FROM STORY

Creative and artful demonstrations of participant story informed this inquiry. Participants quite literally had the opportunity to reflect and perceive their experience and channel it visually through the creative act of collage making, giving insight into personal truth and the impact and phenomenon of *story-o-typing*. Throughout this chapter, I reflect on my experiences as a researcher and with participants. I look back at the research stages and processes involved in the co-creation of story narratives, and the re-telling and re-storying of participant narratives. In doing this, I discuss the connections and commonalities between stories, anchored by my own collage making process where my visual representation of the data collected shows the interconnection of stories and the central themes discovered. My collage representation (*Figure 7*) also serves to guide my discussion of themes in this section while it likewise intentionally carries forward, honours, and recognizes art/collage installations as a unique form of communication, underscoring the anti-oppressive tone and purpose of this scholarly endeavour. Indeed, the process of creating collage art, in combination with the written articulation of research narrative findings, has helped me discern and show the complexity and detail within “presentational forms of knowing” (Prince, 2022) and as it engages and establishes crystallization of knowledge production emerging from visual and narrative stories. Ellingson (2009) nicely explains this process as she expounds:

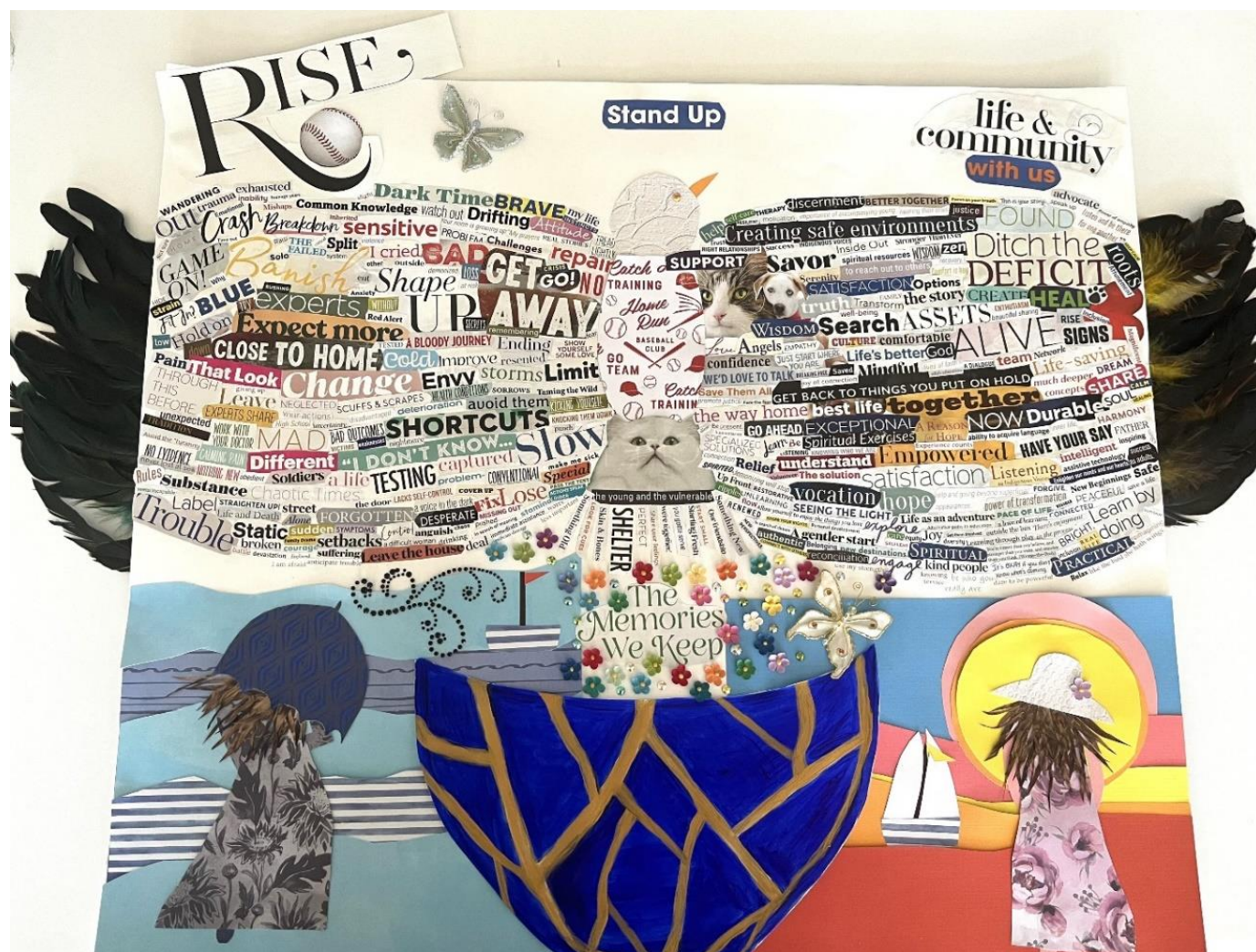
Juxtaposing different ways of knowing through crystallization reveals subtleties in data that remain masked when researchers use only one genre to report findings. Thus, an emotionally evocative narrative points to the lack of human feeling captured in systematic data analysis, while analysis points to the larger social trends within which the unique, individual narrative must be situated to be understood. Constructing themes or

patterns, searching for evocative moments to capture, and identifying invocations of power in discourse all constitute examples of good strategies, and crystallization requires engaging in at least two. (p. 11)

As you can see, my collage representation below brings together elements of language using pictorial mediums to illustrate the interrelationship between imaginal and dialogical modes of communication and expression, while also exemplifying and emphasizing one of the many possibilities that exist within artistic and alternative ways of seeing and knowing in pedagogical and research applications.

Figure 7

Collage Representing Findings of Storied Themes and Patterns



As mentioned earlier, the collage composition above has greatly assisted me in exploring the narrative storylines, the transcribed texts, and the restoried data, by taking the representation of study findings a step further as I display found themes over my own collage. An attempt has been made to comprehensively thicken, augment, and assimilate prevailing themes through this visual representation of key research findings. Full accounts of participant stories have been intentionally provided in the previous chapter, giving the reader an in-depth understanding of participant experiences (with subject headings or labelling applied to sections of storied narratives showing the messages received related to perceptions of *story-o-typing*).

Throughout this chapter, I narrow my discussion to synthesize the results, showing a synopsis of the patterns that shone through as I stood back in full view of the stories, to visually locate the central themes. Over this effort, I attempted to make sense of emerging themes by abstractly reflecting and processing themes taken from participant stories as I collaged. This process helped me to see and make clear the central themes and patterns that became apparent over co-created dialogue between myself and each participant. Thus, I will speak to the visual points made in my collage through this chapter, recognizing that my findings may only graze the surface of what can be known, remembering that what is discovered within this work forms a partial and incomplete story; a mere glimpse into three lives. Moreover, any articulation of meaning or discussion of results is open to future and ongoing interpretation. In keeping with any artistic and qualitative process, only a partial understanding of experience can be obtained or made available in the moment. It is understood and expected that ongoing interpretations of story will crystallize and deepen through processes of discernment, as they come into greater focus over time. Ellingson (2009) speaks to this very point as she writes, “since researchers construct knowledge and representations ... all accounts are inherently partial, situated, and contingent”

(p. 22). To this point, I invite the reader of this work to take in the art installations and narratives produced to draw in and upon your own insights and unique interpretations of the stories told and presented. What parts of these stories provoke thought and meaning for you?

Two Central Themes/Patterns (Trauma & Resilience) Emerge Over Stories

For me, as I stand back and review the shared disappointments and frustrations conveyed by participants, there is a clear juxtaposition between negative and positive, as an element of buoyancy, strength, and hope emerges from difficulty within each storied experience. This visible dichotomy of *trauma* and *resilience* clearly comes to the surface when comprehensively looking at all storied accounts. We may firstly notice negative messages and experiences of *story-o-typing* taken up and expressed by participants, given that this was the instruction of the research exercise. Over time, however, through the living of life, participants seem to have experienced a shift of consciousness as stories veer toward the positive. To be sure, we are left in the end with stories of strength and resilience, described and evidenced over all three stories. Paying close attention to what has been said, and how stories have been conveyed and developed, two distinct themes surface, verifying both visually and verbally how struggle and trauma can lead to personal resilience and a desire to reach toward establishing and embracing happiness. This revelation is no doubt a happy discovery for me and one that was somewhat unexpected. Participant narratives and art installations are not exclusively sad stories or depictions reciting loss, disappointment, and pain. Instead, they resound with promise and show how innate human strength can help people sustain and eventually thrive despite the oppressive forces at play. Perhaps it can be said that, in some or many cases, personal struggle can motivate and propel someone toward finding a way forward; to seek personal satisfaction and happiness. I would say over these stories that a choice has been made to be happy. It seems as though

existential crisis pushes the human spirit toward striving for answers, for meaning, and for prioritizing what is of value and important. We see within study findings demonstrations of persistence as participants seek a better path, while they show resistance to negative messaging. It is a demonstration of the ferocity of the human will, preferring to reach for what is personally of value as Mary, Carly, and Ella push for survival, meaning, and purpose.

Theme 1: Trauma. I will speak about the theme of trauma emerging from narratives and study findings. For clarity, however, I will revisit the definition of “trauma” and how it can manifest and be experienced in childhood. Trauma, also referred to in the literature as *adverse childhood experiences* (ACEs), is known to cause or induce traumatic stress responses in children. Racine, et al. (2020) report that childhood adversity or ACEs can range from experiences of “maltreatment” and can include “physical, sexual, emotional abuse and neglect and household dysfunction (witnessing domestic violence, parental incarceration, mental illness, substance use, or divorce) [and] is a leading public health concern, with 45 % of children experiencing some form of adversity in childhood” (p. 104374). That is almost half of all children and adolescents who have experienced some form of adversity (a statistic that was available prior to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic – perhaps with higher incidents of ACEs now given recent global events). Petrone and Staton (2021) have indeed cited the pandemic as a “trauma enhancing factor” related to heightened experiences and incidents of adversity and trauma, making it an urgent and topical issue to address (p. 542). Therefore, it is imperative that teachers and other practitioners who work with children and youth understand trauma and trauma responses so that they can lead from a trauma informed perspective.

Markers of behaviour seen in children who have experiences trauma or ACEs include “...trauma-related distress symptoms, such as intrusive thoughts, guilt, shame, sadness, and

anger, that may precipitate a cascade of negative sequelae including psychopathology, school and social difficulties, substance use, poor long-term health, and later perpetuation of maltreatment” (Racine, et al., 2020, p. 104375). Moreover, because each child is different, behaviours related to trauma can manifest in different ways with varied levels of intensity and severity. Trauma can also be compounded in individual cases, as Hébert, et al. (2018) assert there can be cumulative effects of childhood adversity, meaning “... the interaction between two or more adverse experiences produces a greater combined effect than the sum of the individual effects ...” (p. 306). My study most definitely shows how trauma and how cumulative trauma can impact the child and their experience in schools.

In keeping with the idea of cumulative personal traumatic experiences, study findings show how schools can contribute to trauma and are thus often trauma producing. Petrone and Stanton (2021) have noted a gap in research literature acknowledging and showing that “... schools and education research processes themselves are often trauma-producing for many young people” (p. 540). They go on to dispute the assertion that schools are exclusively places for students to “learn” and to “heal” and they counter that students are in “survival mode” exclusively or because of experiences outside of school. On the contrary, they purport,

(1) that students may be in a survival mode in schools because of schools and (2) that schools can create a safe environment by attending to particular interactional styles without attending to deeper systemic, trauma-producing issues like institutionalized racism, classism, and homophobia embedded in curricula, school policies, and state-mandated assessments, as well as historical legacies of oppression connected to schooling. (p. 540).

Petrone and Stanton (2021) go on to call for trauma-informed practice in schools and research that "... lead to the development of or revitalization of responsible, respectful, relational, and reciprocal approaches to studying and understanding trauma (p. 542).

To evolve the discussion a bit further, Paccione-Dyszlewski (2016) indicate agreement with previously cited scholars on this topic and offer, "there is hardly a child who crosses the threshold of a school who does not carry with them a reservoir of trauma." Having made this statement, she goes on to speak about the importance of trauma informed schools as she writes, "Trauma-informed care is an organizational, structural, and treatment framework that involves understanding, recognizing, and responding to all kinds of trauma" (p. 8). She speaks of how schools and their staff can position themselves to understand the perspective of the child, recognizing that behaviours and responses are often rooted in trauma. She advises:

A central concept of a trauma-informed setting is that everyone who interacts with a student assumes that every child has trauma in his/her background and acts accordingly. There needs to be an understanding among educators of the symptoms of toxic stress and how these effects present themselves in a school setting. With these conditions in place, educators can work to create a kinder, gentler environment where children feel free to reveal their trauma. A culture based on trust and acceptance can go a long way toward creating a positive learning environment that also can heal and transcend the effects of toxic stress. (p. 8)

I will speak in greater detail later in the next chapter on the tenets of trauma-informed schools. For now, however, we can see from Paccione-Dyszlewski's (2016) definition regarding trauma-informed settings that there are common values and an overlap of ideologies and tenets related to strengths-or asset-based pedagogies; appreciative inquiry approaches; person-centred dialogical

approaches; narrative counselling and seeing the problem outside of the person; culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogies, and so on.

Collage Depiction of Findings. In view of the collage I have created (*Figure 7*), a representation of research findings shows the dichotomy between trauma and resilience within participant stories. The woman depicted on the left (bottom of the collage) shows her walking alone through a storm, yet she is shielded to some degree by the umbrella she is carrying. Somehow, she musters strength and courage to get through the difficulty. She sustains and is eventually brought to a time and place by her inner reserve. Her new surroundings and environment, and the people she meets, guide her while nurturing her self-understanding. In the end, she discovers her true value, leading her to realize and uncover how she wants to live out and express her authentic interests. She has literally walked through a storm and, while shaken, she emerges stronger, resilient, and with a clearer vision of herself and her goals and desires. She has grown through adversity and knows what is important to her. Her journey of self-discovery and expression of her strengths now leads the way. Indeed, she walks toward her preferred life. Keeping the memories of her past intact as hard-learned-lessons. The cold environment disappears and evaporates as she enters a welcoming space, greeted by the warm embrace of sun. She gazes gently into the bright horizon, only occasionally looking back to take account of the cold days of her youth. With deep gratitude, she is grounded by her breath, and she sighs, saying to herself, “I have survived. My future is now, and I am free to be myself.” Mary specifically shows this transition from dark places to authentic, buoyant, and grateful spaces. Initially, we meet her and listen as she describes a theme of darkness. So poignantly she recounts her experience in public school, as she expresses:

‘The whisper on the night wind.’ I resonated with that a lot cause it really, it felt like, you know, you could have your hand raised in class and have a specific question, and it would be, ‘why would you ask that question?’ I just feel like I’m literally just walking down, like, if you can picture it, just a picture it, just a pitch-black street, completely snowing and you’re just being blown by the wind, you just literally feel black and cold and alone. You know you just feel like you’re kind of being breezed around and you’ll float to where you float, ending up wherever you end up sometimes.

The personal and school trauma Mary describes however, served to propel her toward reaching for better. Mary in the end finds an older and wiser version of herself – a stronger version of the little girl who courageously sustained through so much personal and school disappointment. She is now a young woman filled with empathy for herself and others, with a desire to express her care by serving her community, helping others, and striving for personal and daily happiness. Using Mary’s, example, she advances her story to one of empowerment as she conveys that it wasn’t until after she left high school that she realized, “...life isn’t as bad as it seemed ... I can make it how I want it; I can make it as bad as I want it, or I can make it as good as I want it ... like it’s in my control.”

It seems Mary was able to release some of her school and personal trauma by claiming personal freedom and control over her decisions in adulthood, as she goes on to state,

...You know damage has been done. I have scars all over me and the damage has been done, yes. But when I look at those scars in the mirror, at the end of the day I go, ‘I lived through that. ... I still gotta be resilient. I still gotta get back up, and I still gotta go figure out what the heck I’m going to do with the rest of my life because no one else is going to do it for me.’

Mary's story shows the contrast between trauma and resilience. But this transition from negative to positive, or from trauma to resilience, is likewise seen and evidenced in Carly's and Ella's stories. Again, we see a sense of frustration and hopelessness in childhood that eventually evolves into enthusiasm and excitement through their adult years as both claim *authority* over their lives and decidedly embrace the numerous possibilities available to them. Carly and Ella can now decide for themselves who they are, truly, as they consciously live a life of their choosing. In Carly's case, as she discusses her experience of exclusion in school, she relays how she felt:

... discouraged, not wanting to be there at school. That's the way I felt back then ... that I was down here, and they were up there. Instead of being at my level... I'm a human being. I will understand some things, that's the way I look at it.

Ella similarly explains in one segment of her narrative, "I felt really out of place. I didn't feel like I belonged, anywhere." In another segment she continues by expressing how her experience in public school was, "Negative, it was always negative. It never felt positive." Yet these sentiments are revised, reshaped, and renewed, after engagement within a new environment. They all echo a similar sentiment of gratitude about their adult experiences within supportive environments, namely their current adult learning network. They offer descriptions of appreciation as their stories describe a turnaround in their lives because of the caring teachers and people they met at their adult learning network. A quote that Mary offered nicely summarizes this point, as she says:

They're [referring to her adult program] like, 'when you're done, come back and volunteer. Just you know, hang out with us.' You know, it felt nice to be reinvited back, or you know, they were like, 'I'd love to see you in your uniform once you become a

police officer. Like, we want to see you get somewhere.’ And I needed that. Like, thank you. I would burn down an entire city to keep the school going, because this program here is definitely, they show you that you have each other.

Personal/family traumas are exacerbated by trauma producing schools. Stories of trauma show up in two forms throughout all three narratives. We see an element of personal or family trauma that is exacerbated, complicated, and compounded by the negative messaging encountered in the school system, thus leading to further traumatization of participants. I think it is important to note that from the personal accounts of participants, all of them have had or experienced other forms of disadvantage, trauma, and exclusion (due to culture, sexual orientation, ethnicity, neurodiversity, poverty, parental instability, et cetera). Their personal lives outside of school were complicated, exacerbated and compounded by a public school system that seemed to misunderstand them or look past their needs, thus neglecting to acknowledge or address the impact of intersectional traumas and other forms of marginalization.

Privileged systems with privileged people do not grasp or have proper insight into those who are marginalized, disadvantaged, or subjugated. This lack of insight seems obvious in view of the climate of public schools, and the almost exclusive focus on academics and the lack of supportive services (resources, counselling, community services, health). Development of the whole person is missing, while accessibility to holistic care is an issue and theme that I would like to recognize and emphasize, with recommendations in this regard being discussed later. It should be said, however, that participants in this study who experienced educational stratification have also been marginalized for other reasons, placing them at increased risk of learning challenges because public education systems tend to be rigid and narrow in focus, and tied predominantly to ableism and academic achievement. Often if students do not fit nicely into the

box, they encounter struggle. As Carly would say, she is “a human being” first, and I would add, a student second.

Theme 2: Resilience Comes from Inner Strength & Positive Relationships

Definitions of *resilience* appearing in scholarly discourse are positioned based on etymology or the origins of the word: “The word itself has roots in the Latin verb, *resilire* (to rebound)” (Masten, 2014, p. 7). The field of resilience is mostly taken up by “Social scientists intrigued with understanding how some people escape the harmful effects of severe adversity, cope well, bounce back, or even thrive ...” (Masten, 2014, p. 7). A stark turnaround in story is shown through participants’ progression across lived experience, with small themes of resilience building and getting larger when they leave public school systems and make their way into adult education systems. A holistic, strengths-based model of education is seen in their specific learning network that embraces and supports positive relationships; where people are seen for who they are; their uniqueness and lived experience recognized as an important part of the equation; and where participants are offered the space to channel and express their innate strengths, traits, and desires. This positive environment in turn seems to create an acknowledgement of their innate worth and goodness, which cultivates trust, capability, and confidence within participants.

A theme of resilience can be stated as having occurred over participant stories, but it seems resilience in these instances is tied to two specific variables: 1). The mindset, strength and inner reserve of the person encountering adversity, also referred to as “trait resilience”; 2). The positive relationships and environment, later established in adult programming, served to reframe adverse experiences. This is referred to in the literature as “transactional/social-ecological approach to resilience” (Kuldas & Foody, 2022, p. 1353). While difficult to predict as an

absolute, it seems both trait and transactional components of resilience emerge and function mutually in my study as participants describe finding resilience through positive relationships. This finding is in keeping with research discourse (Rutter, 1987; Southwick et al., 2014; Ungar, 2013a; Waller, 2001) who view resilience as having moved from "... a static/individualistic conceptualization to the contextual/relational aspects of positive adaptation in the face of adversity" (Kuldas & Foody, 2022, p. 1356). Ungar (2013a) provides a clear definition of how resilience is fostered, based on relationships and positive environmental influences, as he writes:

Resilience is understood as more than a set of individual competencies under stress: the higher the level of adversity children experience, the more they benefit from resources that facilitate successful pro-social forms of coping such as an empowering relationship with a caring adult. It is the optimal functioning of the young person's environment that is the most important factor in deciding children's resilience rather than the specific capacities of children themselves. (p. 330)

In keeping with Ungar's (2013a) definition of resilience, in study findings we can see how quality relationships in safe environments serve to either support or discourage participants. Indeed, when components of strengths-based, appreciative, and culturally responsive/relational pedagogical approaches are missing (as noted over participant stories in public schools) this often leads to feelings of upset and despair. Yet, in stark contrast, we see how participants perk up as they describe positive interactions and experiences in public school and in adult education. Moreover, when participants portray only brief instances or accounts of positive relationships in difficult school situations, they describe these positive interactions as most helpful, memorable and sustaining. The power of just one positive role model, interaction, or conversation with a teacher or mentor has been shown to encourage resilience and hope in participants. Indeed, even

when positive school relationships are seemingly few and have merely dotted participant stories, they have been cited as sustaining and uplifting in the face of overall disappointment and distress. To be sure, small or fleeting moments of support have imparted lasting memories that have withstood years and decades. An example of this is when Ella was telling me about her gym teacher, as she explained, “My gym teacher was always the one that helped me out with a lot of things. Like if I had a problem, I can go talk to him about it.” Mary, Carly, and Ella, all give accounts of the nurturing power of at least one person or teacher who, while in public school, offered them warmth, understanding and care. For Mary it was a trusted teacher and his wife (a counsellor) who gave her support after school hours; for Carly it was her father she went to for advice; and for Ella it was her trusted gym teacher who offered her an upbeat and light interaction and a listening ear when times were tough. Moreover, we see that when human trust is broken, it is the love and relationship established with animals that takes precedence and is of paramount importance through the storied lives of participants. Consistently, a theme of *relationship* emerges very strongly and holds importance over the findings of this research, illustrating how the power of relationship can be either a destructive or sustaining force; having the potential to lift someone up or tear them down. Mary speaks to this point as she wisely offers,

You know each kid is unique in their own way and until you give them that option, to show their uniqueness, they're giving them nothing to live for ... And that's all you need, you know, someone to look at you and go, I'm proud of you. That's all anyone needs ...

Resilience does prevail, as we have seen through the stories of Mary, Carly, and Ella, with each recounting how hard times led them to ask “why?” Participants were plagued with challenges while others seemed to have very different, easier circumstances and experiences. Feelings of exclusion, inadequacy, and hopelessness during their public-school experiences

meant that they had to access their inner reserve, where their internal dialogue cultivated a special, personal relationship with themselves when they had no one else. It was through relationship with themselves that greater meaning was sought and inner strength was seemingly found. Through a discovery of their inner world, they were acutely aware of their surroundings and the meaning that could be found around them. And given that human connection was often negatively oriented and complicated, they were brought to seeking connection in a different way. Connection instead through internal modes of mind, body, and spirit. For Mary this meant seeking answers from God, as she accessed a local church and decided to baptize herself. To seek direction and inspiration from God, asking for help from the only accessible thing available to her in that moment – a higher source. Mary also speaks of how practices of meditation saved and sustained her in difficult times. For Carly she retreated to her home and sought counsel from her father while focusing on her own needs and interests. Carly also speaks of the merits and benefits of meditation and creative pursuits as these things relax and help to nurture her mental health and wellbeing. And for Ella, she leaned into the messages from spirit as she embraced her Mi'kmaq culture, with a deep respect for Mother Earth and for nature. The significance of life's creatures came into greater focus as they greeted and spoke to her with spiritual messages and offerings of hope and support.

At the completion of my research endeavor, findings reveal stories that portray initial trauma culminating in demonstrations of ultimate resilience. I have depicted these findings and themes in my collage through the creation of images representing strength and freedom. As Mary conveyed in the later part of her discourse, "Some of the most expensive art pieces in the world are Chinese gold bowls. It's the broken glass bowls that are repaired with pure gold." You will see a depiction of a blue bowl held together with gold at the centre of my collage. This bowl

represents what is known as *kintsugi*, which is the Japanese art of piecing together broken bowls with gold. Dobkin (2022) defines the usefulness of kintsugi, by explaining, “When a piece of pottery is broken, the craftsman repairs it with gold or silver. Thus, it is more beautiful [and perhaps stronger] than in its original intact state” (p. 251). In honour of Mary’s metaphor, I offer a kintsugi bowl in my collage representation to convey the strength and resilience documented and displayed throughout participant stories. It seems to be a fitting illustration and reminder that with adversity comes strength, or in Mary’s sage words, “The damage is done, but just because you’re damaged doesn’t mean you’re broken.”

Finally, the bird at the centre of my collage depicts a symbol of a *phoenix rising* from the ashes. Like Mary, Carly, and Ella, this bird rises from challenging circumstances. And after the traumas are at a safe distance, the wisdom gleaned from these experiences serves to lift them closer to their desired destinations with a fuller understanding of Self. They rise from difficulty to soar freely, released from their fears and the negative judgements received from others. Living unencumbered in the moment and taking on the sky with an open embrace of possibility. Indeed, resilience is a theme that clearly emerges from this scholarly pursuit. As Mary confirms she now feels strong, flying with, “My own wings. My own feathers. My own sky.”

The Power of Relationship

It was an early assumption and expectation that this study would reveal the impact and importance of personal interaction, connection to others, and relationships. After all, relationships serve as a sustaining, core human need. We all know or have heard the adage, “people need other people,” or we are “social creatures,” or “relationship and connection is part of the human condition.” From undertaking this research, I have deeply pondered the concept of relationship and whether human interaction, thus relationship, is so commonplace and essential

to life that the power of it is lost or taken for granted as we proceed or get lost in the smaller details of living life. Perhaps the element of relationship is so integral to life that we negate placing deliberate emphasis on creating positive interactions. Or perhaps our style of relating is so automatic or ingrained within us that we often proceed on autopilot and lose sight of the importance of creating positive and life-giving relationships. We forget, especially when raising or working with children – those who are human sponges – that the quality of our relationships and human interactions sets the stage for attachment style (which is a whole other conversation) which determines ease of connection within adult relationship, or struggle if we have developed through unhealthy attachments. Do we perhaps rush through life to the detriment of paying attention to how we interact with each other? To be sure, our interactions are so important, and our demeanor and way of being in relationship has impact on those around us, in the short and long term. These daily interactions impact how we think about ourselves, others, and the world. If someone is traumatized by unhealthy relationships, they interact with the world very differently than someone who has had the benefit of secure attachments and relationships. Having said all of that, I am highlighting then the power of positive relationships as it surfaces here in my study. Positive relationships are indeed essential for healthy emotional development, success, and wellbeing. Perhaps, then, the next logical step coming from this project is to delve into the question: What are the features of creating positive relationships? Maybe there is an obvious answer to this question, but if it were that obvious, would there be a need for a study on *story-o-typing*?

It is our relationship with others that establishes the relationship we have with ourselves. This dynamic between ourselves and others is paramount to how we feel about who we are and the direction or path we take through life. As we have seen over the accounts of story in this

study, the personal relationship we have with ourselves is based on the messaging we receive from our environment and from those around us. It serves as a launch point for my discussion of results pertaining specifically to the elements of *story-o-typing* and *outside-in messaging* as it relates to school relationships through participant stories. It also serves as a commentary and feature of how identity takes shape. External judgements of personhood, circumstances, and capability blend together when someone is young and developing, setting the tone for the overall trajectory taken in life. From my study findings, identity development seems to hinge on the quality of our experiences as well as on the quality of messages received.

Themes Emerging from Randall's (2014) Story-o-typing and Concepts of Story

As discussed in the previous *Methodologies* chapter (*Chapter 4*), I have used Randall's (2014) *concepts of story* to frame or construct my study, and to add layers of interpretation, which ties to the critical leaning of this research as it seeks insight into the impact of *story-o-typing* on *lower tracked, educationally stratified* students. Randall's (2014) *concepts of story* is nicely positioned as it offers a critical perspective through an overlay of themes associated with how personal story may be taken up by the participant and made sense of in the telling and re-telling of story. The elicitation of the hidden identity, or untold story, that may lie just under the surface is of paramount importance to my inquiry. Seeking the untold story is key in psychological research, as is discussed by Larsson and Sjöblom (2009) as they offer, "... the researcher must also try to apprehend the more or less submerged stories or what is not said in order to get the whole story or a more complex understanding of the history" (p. 275).

Randall's *concepts or aspects of story* are a complicated yet complementary dichotomy outlining parts of story. In view of the findings, I will discuss themes related to the *outside-in story*, or "... what others [have made] ... of me on their own, with or (usually) without my

consent” (p. 58). I will then move into the other levels or aspects of story (*inside story, inside-out story*) that were naturally revealed through participant dialogue to illustrate how *outside-in* messages have impacted the *inside-story* or inner dialogue of participants, and then how this translated or linked into their *inside-out story* concerning how school and learning oriented messages impacted their sense of self, understanding of capability, and view of the world. It is thought that these three facets of story (*outside-in, inside, inside-out*) are a dichotomy of story concepts that work together to help us grasp how identity is shaped, expressed, and conveyed, based on interactions and relationships and how they impact student experience in public education systems.

Outside-in Story:

“The story told to me by others,” ties back to the *story-o-typing* exercise participants were asked to do involving collaging their experience in schools (Randall, 2014, p. 57). Several similarly oriented questions pertaining to *story-o-typing* were posed to participants on the day of research to help them necessitate their telling of school story through collage making. The initial questions posed to participations were:

How were you *story-o-typed* by the public education system?

What messages were offered to you without your consent?

How would you represent your experience in schools in your collage?

Throughout the stories of Mary, Carly, and Ella, there were multiple common messages that were described by them, experienced while they were attending public school. These messages can be categorized into four themes that pertain to exclusionary messaging or behaviours directed at them translating into some form of additional marginalization associated with perceived weakness or differences; thus, leading to multiple ways these students were *story-o-*

typed and/or marginalized. Remember, participants were previously screened for criteria associated with *educational stratification*, which included academic or behavioural struggles while attending public school; however, other forms of marginalization were found to have occurred, adding to their academic struggles, or perhaps because of them. The themes are: *Bullying and Exclusion; Health and Neurodiversity; Family Challenges; Dismissive Messages/Body Language*. There is a fifth theme that is notable to report as well that pertains to incidents of support that I will likewise touch upon entitled: *Positive Messages/Relationships*.

Bullying

I will start by writing about the bullying that was reported by participants. There are claims made by participants that show both peers and teachers contributed or partook in acts of bullying directed at participants, or at the very least there were reports of voiced negative judgements or microaggressions (body language and gestures). Acts of bullying, or an attunement toward negative perceptions leading to negatively oriented gestures, are seen coming from children/peers and adults/school staff. Storied participant accounts show that judgemental, exclusionary behaviours start young and continue into adulthood if left unchecked or unaddressed. Perhaps placing our judgements onto others or *story-o-typing* them is part of our natural tendency to make sense of someone. But, as we have witnessed here, the evaluation of others outside of ourselves seems to be focused on judgement of difference, seemingly based on the accepted ideals of what “normal” looks like, or perhaps judgements are made by comparisons to ourselves.

Participant accounts show a tendency for people to offer assessments of weakness or noted differences from that which has been deemed “normal” based on dominant ideologies of how things or people should be, or recognition of differences from our own understanding of

normal based on our personal positioning in life. Participants provide accounts of being judged based on the status of their health (physical and mental), their neurodiversity and learning needs, family circumstances, socio-economic status, sexual orientation, and so on. To reference some of the *outside-in* messaging, Carly provides a troubling account as she describes how a parent in her neighborhood allowed or even encouraged their daughter to fight Carly. She describes the scene by saying:

... the last fight that I remember ... they were coming at me again. And the parents of the girl that was coming started the fight with me, the mother came outside too and said to the other four girls, 'stay out of it. Stay back. Let her fight me.'

I offer Carly's words to illustrate that judgements are taught, and biases formed early from infancy to adulthood, based on the messages received from parents, peers, teachers, other allied professionals, the media, et cetera. Indeed, we see incidents of children bullying and fighting other children; like Mary speaking about a time when she was shoved and locked into a locker by her peers in response to her sexual orientation; and we hear Ella's account of a peer teasing her, as they recite, "four eyes, four eyes, needs glasses to see." These behaviours are reported on over adult/teacher relationships too, as Ella's describes how a teacher poked fun at her as she was trying to grasp reading, She recalls:

My classmates and ... my teachers made fun of me because I couldn't read and write properly ... I got picked on by the staff and the students. And once one teacher did it once and then he stopped because I stood up and I said, 'You make fun of me again, I'm gonna throw the book right in your face.' I was trying to pronounce the word out, and he didn't like it, so he made fun of me.

Health and Neurodiversity

We also see more covert forms of marginalization and *story-o-typing* mentioned through labels of deficiency pertaining to health and neurodiversity. Mary's health, for example, poses challenges for her and her school, resulting in the adults around her recommending stratification by way of moving schools. This decision is justified and based on a label of "liability," associated with her health given she had bouts of unexplained fainting. The shortcomings of the system and lack of supports seem to be pushed or transferred onto the student. In this case, Mary feels as though 'she' was the problem, and this is a troublesome *outside-in* message to receive. We see again in Mary's case how *outside-in* messaging leads to problematic messaging when she is told "she's not *allowed* to go home" because "your mother is on medication and on pills and stuff that she shouldn't be on while taking care of someone your age." While it may be true that Mary's mother could not look after her properly given the circumstances, the concern resides in the manner in which the information is conveyed to her. The information given to Mary, as she presents it, was judgmental in tone and offered to her through deficit-oriented conceptions of her mother where she (Mary's mother) was essentially blamed for her addiction issues (or doing something wrong). The messaging offered to Mary by her teacher was likewise abrupt and disapproving, rather than being supportive, empathic, understanding, and trauma informed. Mary had been offered so many external messages of deficiency pertaining directly to her and her family, leaving her feeling "broken" and "alone." She expresses how she had to rely upon herself through these challenges when she states, "you don't have anybody but yourself" and then later continues by saying,

...it's really hard to grow healthy when the one place you go...you're told you go to school and you can grow here and you can have as much love as you want, as much care

as you want from school, and it's actually the complete opposite. It really takes away the aspect of growing healthy. You just feel like you're kind of taking 10 steps back for every step forward.

Carly also expresses discouragement in school as she speaks of being bullied, which relates to *outside-in* messaging, as she offers; “They've always been picking at me and bullying me and stuff. Yeah, in junior high ... but they said it's more teasing me and stuff. But the way I took it, it was being nasty to me and stuff.” Carly’s account is a clear example of *outside-in* messaging where she indicates that she felt bullied, yet she is corrected and told it was “teasing.” Is teasing okay? Perhaps an acceptable form of bullying? Again, we see a diminishment of her voice and a disregard of her feelings. With a lack of intervention, Carly feels unheard, to the point where she physically wants to withdraw or perhaps disappear. She mentions this at least twice in her story by saying, “... I felt like going in the corner away from everybody, just hide myself.” Without proper support and interventions, the child ultimately feels as though they are unimportant or do not matter. As Carly confirms, “I felt like I was a nobody.” While Ella conveys an unease and trauma in public school, as she states “... We don't even know which way they're going to come from. Are they going to turn on us very quickly or are they going to stab us in the back or We don't know.” I think this statement indeed speaks to how trauma in life and school can manifest in the child, creating heightened emotions, fear, and mistrust of others as they attempt to engage in learning environments. They are often emotionally over aroused because of the trauma they have experienced, their nervous systems on high alert. Even as children grow into adults, with trust broken early on, self-preservation takes hold and people become the enemy.

Family Challenges

We see family challenges being discussed over all participant stories with each citing some level of stress or domestic issue in their home life. Ella spoke about her older brother “bullying” her. Carly spoke about having a difficult relationship with her mother who she described as “mean and disgusting” while also referencing how her neighbourhood sat within an impoverished community. My sense is that there were obviously more stories of trauma to uncover in these instances, but it was not appropriate for me to pursue that with them given that it would have been unethical for me to pry into their stories of trauma. My research did not focus there. Mary, however, was very open about explaining her family circumstances as she felt it tied directly to her experience of *story-o-typing*. She felt many teachers at her school were aware of her situation, which impacted their impressions of her. She does reference in one part of her story that she felt the assumption was she was like her mother, thus “you're a product of where you've come from.” as she describes:

...they were sitting back and waiting for me to go off on drugs, like my mother, just so they could have kind of kicked me out. Like that's how it felt, like they were just sitting back and watching me from a corner and waiting until I messed up.

As we've heard from Mary's very personal account, she was taken from her home and dismissed from her community school for health reasons. Her family was dismantled and she described her emancipation from her mother, while her father was not fully present in her life. Both parents suffered with addictions and I would suspect have their own stories of trauma. With the upheaval and chaos in Mary's life she was an extremely vulnerable child, yet reportedly she was without the support needed to feel cared for and secure at school or anywhere for that matter. Mary describes feeling very out of place, which was further compounded by the privilege

she saw at her community school. As she put it, it was a school for the privileged, “it was a school where all the big heads go.” Mary makes an important point by speaking about the privilege around her. For those who have privilege and stability in life, it can be hard to fathom or understand someone who may live in a very different world. Mary did reference at one point in her story how those at her school were aware her mother was an addict. Mary of course felt different from the other students and thus was judged for it by all the chaos happening at home and compounded by her health concerns. She uses the metaphor, “They took my boat apart piece by piece and all that I'm left with is barely the floating piece.” She frames this sentiment by saying,

...when you're walking around a group of teachers that you very well know that one teacher talked to 10 teachers who talked to 20 teachers. You feel it, you feel the presence of just not being welcomed. Having those opportunities ripped from you because again, you have 20 teachers looking at you like you're nothing. Like you, you don't equal anything.

I use Mary's example as it clearly shows, from her vantage, how the school was a contributor to her being or feeling *story-o-typed* and *educationally stratified*. Different, unwelcome, and unwanted are perhaps the words to describe how Mary felt. Being asked to leave school by letter would certainly justify and be sufficient proof for most of their undesirability. At least that is how a child would interpret it, and that is how Mary interpreted it. Not being understood and with several challenges to maneuver and barriers preventing her success and safety, she does go on to say how she felt, “‘Uninvited’ was definitely, you know, just altogether, just felt uninvited to the entire situation.”

We likewise see how family strife can impact the child thus impacting how others view the child. Personal circumstance can tie to student *story-o-typing*. Mary felt that the school did not want her there, perhaps because they were ill-equipped to manage her situation, but it is the messaging around her circumstance that highlights the divide that exists between those who sit in privilege and those who need extra care and support. It is this divide that shapes the external story of deficiency applied to Mary. This same divide translates into the dismissive messaging offered to Mary as the school's reaction to her translates for her into the pronouncement, "We don't deal with this at the school." Pushed to peripheral, Mary is left with a feeling of shame and isolation as she shares, "you just literally feel black and cold and alone."

Dismissive Messages/Body Language Speaks Volumes.

Body language as well as dismissive messages is discussed throughout all three stories. We see many examples discussed when participants have picked up on microaggressions, disdain, and disapproval throughout their public-school stories. Ella speaks of how she would watch those around her as a gauge to let her know where she stood with her teachers as she offers, "The way they lift the lip, or you know certain little things that judge ... I could pick up on it. I know a lot of things about body language." Mary speaks of how body language can show the truth of what someone is thinking, as she extends, "But a person's facial expressions will never lie to you; someone's body language will never lie to you, you know." While Carly expresses this point by saying, "I felt like I was a nobody," in reference to her recollection that her teachers stood back and allowed others to fight her. She shares, "All the teachers watched it but... no, back then they didn't do anything. Now there's still some places not doing anything. They couldn't care less."

Dismissive or avoidant pedagogical styles also seem to be discussed quite often through participant discourse. Reports of *outside-in* messaging convey a level of detachment between teachers and students, thus students/participants felt overlooked while their needs were diminished. I think Carly speaks of this phenomenon the most as she mentions a bell being used in her small classroom where she would need to ring it and hope assistance would arrive. We also see her explain how support was inconsistent and how "...they [her teachers] just wanted me to keep on working. Keep on going, working, doing," or "try to do it on your own." At another point, she claimed, "There was one teacher that said I couldn't be in that class because I couldn't keep up with them" leading Carly to feel inadequate and rushed in her learning as she states, "They were rushing me." When I asked if she had supportive relationships at school, she indicated she did not, and responded by saying "No no, no, just my parents, my Dad." While Ella offered, "They just told me to go home half of the time... some of the staff ... half of the time they were so negative that they would send us home for no reason at all." While she also conveys that she felt she had to learn on her own, as she discloses, "I tried to help myself to learn, but I still have my learning disability. I didn't have somebody to help me."

As discussed previously, Mary's story shows numerous instances of distancing and ultimate dismissal or removal from school. Her school counsellor, unable to support her because she was tied to another grade level, "switching off" during the school day and unavailable. We also see this in other systems in Mary's instance, with the police showing up and siding with her mother when she was eight years old, believing that Mary was the aggressor. From all of this, Mary laments "...I have the world biggest trust issues now, and I forever will... if I don't trust you, I'm not going to open up the vulnerable parts of me 'cause I know how it feels to have those shattered." Moreover, being conscientious and academically inclined, Mary attempted to engage

in school, but she claims to have received belittling messages from her English teacher. She explains the scenario by speaking about a response she gave to a question posed by her English teacher. She receives the following answer in return, “No, that's wrong. You should probably study some more.” And then when following it up with the principal, receives, ‘She's your teacher.’” These are just a few of the examples cited from participant stories that show or convey an absence of student-centred learning. From these examples, we can see how *outside-in* messaging translates into unmotivated and disheartened students longing to be seen, heard, and appreciated for who they are, in recognition of the possibility of what lies within them.

Positive Relationships and Mentors Sustain (public versus adult education model)

A hopeful theme has been recognized in view of *outside-in* messaging and relates to sustaining and encouraging positive relationships. Story themes establish that a few key teachers and people stand out in the lives of participants. It is the people they have met in their schools and in their communities that have offered them encouragement that have helped them trust again and find a way forward. It has been through sustaining and nourishing relationships that things have turned around for them. As Ella confers, “Being around positive people, I feel like I'm saved ...” as she goes on to express,

I'm happy that I'm back in this program because the group up here is my family ...they brought me in, and they welcomed me in and said, ‘we will help you learn how to do your stuff again.’ And that's what they've been doing. They've been doing really well with me.

With that said, Ella’s positive interactions have shifted her dialogue from one of hopelessness to hopeful, as she shares, “I'm more happy about my future.” Ella also speaks of her relationship with spirit as a guiding and sustaining force, directing her and helping her see things in a positive

light, as she explains, “I had somebody on my shoulder guiding me, my spirit guide. I’ll say it that way. My spirit guide showed me to do the right things and not the wrong. I try to do the right things.” While Carly speaks of a woman and her family who have adopted her as their own, as she shares,

A woman and her family; she’s a bus driver. She drives the Metro Halifax Transit, and her family, her sister and her children and grandchildren, they call me Auntie [Carly] and I’m like their sister. We’ve been close for fifteen or sixteen years.

And in keeping with Carly and Ella, Mary’s story names her adult learning network and her fiancée’s family as her saving grace, acknowledging,

“We can’t do it alone. ... it brings me back to my in-laws now that I think about them, it’s like, I wouldn’t be able to do any of this alone. None of this, you know. I wouldn’t be here had it not been for my mother-in-law... She’s the reason why I’m here and she’s still the reason why I’m still here ...”

Over participant accounts, we can see evidence of how positive relationships are tied to success and happiness. And specifically, the messages received over recent adult education experiences show how integral supportive, caring relationships are to shifting internal narratives and thus the lives of participants from discouraging (public school) to encouraging (adult education) experiences.

Inside Story:

According to Randall (2014) the concept of *inside story*, is “the story of our life that has been processed, [and] interpreted by us internally” (p. 50). The participant narratives offered show in detail the *inside story* which naturally evolved over co-created conversations between researcher and participants. Not surprisingly, we can see and understand how perceived negative

messaging is internalized and processed in youth. Negatively oriented *outside-in* messages translate into emotional discontent expressed in each participant narrative collected. It appears a crisis of the psyche can result from the discouragement that accompanies *story-o-typing* and negative *outside-in* messages, leading to internal processing that points to troubling *inside* messaging, poor self-esteem, despair and viewing oneself in a negative light. One may argue that this internal processing, especially for those who are marginalized in one or numerous ways, have a heightened sense of sensitivity due to the traumas experienced and are less tolerant of negative messaging because of existing traumatic stressors. Understandably, there may be an inclination for those most at-risk or previously traumatized to attune toward negative interpretations and perceptions of themselves and their world amid disapproving or contentious messaging, thus exacerbating emotional-regulation and existing automatic trauma responses. This perhaps makes schools places where a heightened awareness of how trauma is expressed by students. To this point, extra care needs to be taken to ensure students, especially in consideration of at-risk or marginalized students, are not exposed to undue, unnecessary, or condemning language and behaviours from all school partners, personnel, other students. Teachers need to be mindful of trauma-informed approaches given that they have an obligation and mandate to care for and lead others in school environments and to ensure safety. Moreover, it can also be said that in a world already in crisis and traumatized by the COVID-19 pandemic, and with intensifying global tensions, many if not most students would qualify as having an increased risk of traumatic stressors. And it can be argued that deficit-based messaging and pedagogies oriented toward locating deficits in the student impose additional risk of trauma.

The quality and countenance of the messages taken in from environment directly shapes experience and personal identity or opinion of Self, with most students/participants voicing

humiliation, embarrassment, and shame in the face of adversity when messaging was oppositional or contrary to that of being approving. When children are taught through deficit or disapproval, the *inside* messaging reflects the outside or external tone of the messaging. The findings of this study convey this point, with stories showing how environmental messages in public education (negative) are in stark contrast to adult education messaging (positive), with internal messaging and self perception shifting accordingly. This is clearly seen and highlighted through the narratives of participants and research findings showing a stark contrast of thought patterns and a shift of inner-dialogue or self-talk from largely negative messaging coming from experiences in public education shifting to positive messages, internal dialogue, and inner experience correlating with adult education environments. For the sake of blatant clarity, I will list some of the internal thoughts or messages voiced by participants as they have received, processed, and negotiated *negative outside-in* messaging and *story-o-typing* (Figure 8). I will then list the positive cognitions and self-talk stemming from supportive and appreciative pedagogical approaches and environments to show the evolution and positive shift that is noted in study findings resulting from the positive messaging experienced in adult education environments (Figure 9).

Figure 8

Inside Story: Negative Perceptions of Outside-in Messaging or Story-o-typing

- “I am not my mother.”
- “Having your say is absolutely not the case.”
- “This whole school doesn't make me feel like I'm present.”
- “I felt really out of place.”
- “I can't do anything right.”
- “It felt like it was my fault.”
- “Why me?”
- “I'd go to sleep and I'd think of negative thoughts”
- “You just literally feel black and cold and alone.”
- “I'm not good enough.”
- “You just literally, you feel ice cold.”
- “My opportunities have slipped away.”
- Never feeling like I'm good enough for the education system.”
- “You have no one ... thinking no one's proud of you. It feels like
- “I need room to breathe.”
- “Everybody needs help sometimes.”
- “I felt like I was a nobody.”
- “I'm a human being.”
- “What's wrong with me?”
- “Why is no one proud of me?”
- “Negative images inside my head.”
- “Didn't feel safe, didn't feel welcome, didn't feel people could trust me.”
- “Suicidal thoughts”
- “I tried to kill myself.”
- “Shunned”
- “Let down”
- “Just burrow your feelings down your throat and continue on.”

While upsetting to read, the internal processing of outside-in messaging shown in *Figure 8* displays a collection of evidence isolating the language and the interpretation of internal thoughts that were voiced by participants. It provides a direct correlation to how identity is shaped and in sync with environmental influences. The messaging imposed on students/participants coming from adults (and sometimes other children or youth) in public education systems does impact the identity and wellbeing of students in both the short and long term. That said, we also see when students or participants shift or change their location (and if the environment is attuned to strengths-based, appreciative pedagogical approaches), *outside-in* messaging is fluid and typically improves to match the external messages received. We see this through the resulting internal (*inside story*) dialogue of students/participants, which correlates positive environments and people with positive self-talk and internal messaging, self-esteem, and a hopeful attitude. And while the *inside story* or messaging shifts to the positive, residual negative messaging does remain. But it can be said, however, that the negativity becomes dormant within the person with positive comments and feedback taking precedence setting the tone for healthy cognition. Old wounds are healed sufficiently through renewed hope, the building of trust, relationships, and rapport. Indeed, strengths-oriented messaging is healing, serving to cultivate, renew, and attune the inner world of the student/participant toward self-acceptance, capability, and ability. An embrace of what can be achieved, and recognition of ability is the outcome of supportive, student-centred pedagogies. In view of this phenomenon, the following list of internal thoughts or messages voiced by participants shows an evolution and expansion of story when relationships are positive, and hope is found:

Figure 9*Inside Story: Positive Perceptions of Outside-in Messaging or Story-o-typing*

“It doesn't feel like you can handle it, but you can.”	“Sit down, have a conversation with me.”
“I look at those scars in the mirror, at the end of the day I go,	“You're not alone.”
‘I lived through that.’	“Show you that you have each other.”
“It felt nice to be reinvited back (in response to adult learning network).”	“I'm proud of you”
“Tell yourself you're doing better than you think you are.”	“We need to be reminded someone is proud of us.”
“I haven't been doing this all for nothing.”	“Another future is possible.”
“That's all I could have asked for growing up, just somebody to give me the time of day; to ask, ‘are you okay?’	
“Success will be getting to those ultimate goals, and even if you're halfway there, that's still successful.”	
“Just because the first time around didn't work doesn't mean the second time [won't work].”	
“There are many definitions of success and many paths to it.”	
“Once I left the negative and moved into the positive, I felt like I'm more helpful and special and precious.”	

Inside-out Story:

The final concept of story relates to “what I tell (and show) to others and what I make of what happened to me” (Randall, 2014, p. 58). And that has been accomplished through this study with Mary, Carly, and Ella revealing and sharing bits of their inner world in response to the idea of being *story-o-typed* or having assumptive stories imposed on them by others. Said earlier, the stories told through this project provide a glimpse into one possibility. The framing and telling of story has been shaped by the question posed, told in the moment and fashioned by environmental influences on the day of the telling. Stories are momentarily suspended yet they are in transition, like people living life they are fluid and changing. The mood of the teller having an impact on story, as well as the relationship and dynamic between investigator and participant. The impressions of those who listen or partake in the process by reading or witnessing story are also contributors to the meaning of it. Indeed, interpretations of story are ever changing, expanding,

and are perpetually in development. In relation to this idea, Randall (2014) references the work of Mary Catherine Bateson, a linguist and cultural anthropologist. Bateson speaks of “Composing a Life,” as an analogy for how we compose a life perhaps similarly to that of a piece of art; created with the materials around us and composed in an “improvisational” way, “making it up as we go,” thus a “creation of the self” (Randall, 2014, p. 76). This analogy is a perfect example of how my study represents, symbolizes, and crystalizes the untapped personal truth that resides within, accessed by imaginal improvisational and creative acts and processes in the quest of composing a unique story and thus a life (Bateson, 1989). With scenes of life, or in this case, scenes of school life, patched together and held by experiences, we are left with very distinctive and inspiring personal stories that take shape through internal revelations made tangible.

What stands out to me in co-creation of these partial, yet vivid personal stories is somewhat of a surprise. I have come to the realization that these brave people have emancipated themselves from disempowering narratives imposed on them. They are not stuck in the past; they have happily embraced the positive side of life. And, as we have travelled with them over their stories, we arrive at a place where they have shown us their personal transformation and emancipation. It appears that, with distance, growth, and time, positive experiences take over from the bad, transforming participants into a fuller understanding of who they are and what they want from life. Moreover, one could say that they fully understood the innate oppression that resides in systems, countered by their opposition or resistance to it. Perhaps walking away from school in youth was a form of resistance, a deliberate act of their confrontation and their rejection of oppressive forces. Perhaps having distance and viewing life differently from outside of the schoolyard in their adulthood allowed them to gain a fuller understanding of life and the

multitude of possibilities that exists for them. I think of Mary's story as a demonstration of this resistance and distance. She confesses why she ran away to Montreal and the excitement and renewal that came from her getting away and "living her best life." Perhaps these brief moments of freedom in childhood give hope. These acts of resistance helping in the personal discovery of choice and agency.

We see then through this research that, while traumas are still intact, participants have successfully released the negative messages long ago and have landed at a place of personal empowerment and self-understanding. Perhaps it comes down to freedom of choice, but perhaps we must also have faith in the student or person coming into greater consciousness on their own through experience, existential questioning, and a desire for a better world for themselves and others. Perhaps one could say then that personal wisdom inherently resides within while the freedom of self-discovery fosters possibility and growth. Leading the human being by acts of human doing and the undoing of negative messages through positive experience and relationships. People just need to somehow be freed from oppression or oppressive messages to explore unencumbered, and that is what participants in this study have done; whether they have been excused from the system, or they have excused themselves, they have their freedom. They have been freed from the impositions of *educational stratification*. Therefore, my research project was not an exercise with me leading participants to a greater level of consciousness around *story-o-typing*, but rather a confirmation that they were long aware of the *story-o-types* placed upon them and chose to "rise" above this messaging (a feature shown in my collage representing results – *Figure 8*). This research and the realizations stemming from it illustrate a truly co-creative, dialogical process with participants showing me they were already aware and free. As Freire (2000) has said, "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention,

through the restless, impatient continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue the world, with the world, and with each other” (p. 72). And, as I reflect on Freire’s quote, I think about Mary, Carly, and Ella venturing out on their own, away from public school experiences, in discovery of themselves and the world, “re-inventing” themselves through positive relationships and in caring and supportive communities. Ella has spoken to this point as she comments on her adult learning program. It has showed her the value of caring communities as she expresses, “they show you that you have each other.”

In summation of this chapter, Mary, Carly, and Ella, provide compelling accounts of personal strength, resilience, and dignity; their persistence in the face of adversity encourages hope within difficult experiences. Their stories leave us with a greater appreciation and an awareness of how personal identity is formed – through a complex process of the individual interacting with the external world; shaping impressions of self through internal modes in the interpretation of inferences and imprints from external events and messaging. Participant stories, however, consistently reveal how personal sovereignty and choice provoke resilience through difficulty. Yet unfortunately, resilience found comes from adversity, which is not ideal and can create longstanding trauma, interpersonal complications, poor coping mechanisms, and low self-worth.

It can be said that personal experience most certainly shapes who we are; yet a positive finding of this research has shown that *trauma experienced does not necessarily define where we are going or who we become*. It seems personal agency and choice have the potential of creating personal emancipation and transformation. Indeed, we see Mary, Carly, and Ella decide they want better as they pursue and create a life of positivity and connection. Emotional sustainment for them came from turning inward during hard times to nurture and discover personal strength

and truth. It seems paradoxically through difficulty, development, and growth, there is an instinctual activation of fortitude or determination leading to insight and discovery of an *authority within*. An innate knowing of what one wants and perhaps deserves. Deservedness after all is a birthright. An infant, for example, is innocent and thus curiously open to the possibilities of life, fully accepting of love, attention, and affection. In fact, survival and healthy development depends on this kind of nurturing and human connection. This is who we are; we are born accepting and open to the good. But in the face of adversity, neglect, and negativity, the understandable tendency is to retract or recoil in protection, as self-worth is shaken and questioned. Yet we optimistically see Mary, Carly, and Ella face their hardships by reaching for better, for happiness, for safety, with a deep desire *to be valued, to be seen, and to belong*. It appears then an awakening of personal resilience is made possible by the poignant contradiction of negative and positive experiences. *With true flourishing made possible from the influences of positive relationship*. Becoming more, becoming stronger, reaching a deeper, richer level of contentment through sincere contribution and connection with community. The secret ingredient to thriving growing from *trust* in the establishment of *safety* in relationship and environment; allowing students to authentically reveal who they are within, rather than through emphasis of what they are without.

CHAPTER EIGHT: DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, & CONSIDERATIONS

A strength and limitation of qualitative research is that storied “realities” are subjective and individual. Research of this nature is not meant to draw conclusions or to solidify hard objective truths. Insight, however, can be drawn from listening and hearing voices that often remain silent or are uninvited to privileged spheres of discourse or policy discussions. Qualitative research can identify problems for inquiry where we can learn more about a phenomenon, especially as it relates to those who have been marginalized. Thus, a strength of this sort of inquiry lies in individual truths coming to light so that we can ensure all voices and concerns are heard and hopefully addressed over systems that care for *all* people. Moreover, it is through my own experience and voice that I have constructed and processed the information obtained and presented in this inquiry. To be sure, it is a subjective account of my experience married with student/participant voices in reflexivity. Perspective based on experience can be construed as a weakness of a subjective inquiry, but when groups of people voice similar experiences, a common pattern or phenomenon can be shown, giving merit to subjective meaning making. Experiences are indicative of the world we live in. When we invite dialogue, we bring someone’s lived world to light, coming closer to finding and understanding things that we perhaps would not have otherwise seen or knew existed in someone else’s world. To be sure, neutrality in human-centred research is an impossibility. This sort of research is not an objective pursuit. It is instead a deliberate quest to take in another’s account, granting an opening to discover by looking through someone else’s eyes.

My promise as a qualitative researcher is to speak my own truth as I accompany the personal truths of others. With this level of transparency and with an admittance of my bias, my study most certainly leans toward the critical. It is with this assertion and intention that I

proceeded with this research, and this same intention continued as I undertook the writing of this next section regarding themes and concerns that have been discussed and unearthed. These are critical musings are anchored by the concerns expressed by participants and supported by the critical theories and pedagogies that underpin my study. The musings are inspired by my own experiences and by those who have so graciously given their time, offering their stories, hopeful that other people who are suffering could likewise be helped and sustained through hard times. They have answered the call of critical pedagogy to deliberately take action through dialogue in an attempt to transform lives and to make the world a better place for all. Questions that come to mind most often for me relate to how our world could be different if we educated our youth exclusively through strengths-based pedagogies. Would children resist schools that supported them academically and emotionally in full acknowledgement of the attributes they bring? How do we come know their unique attributes within current narrowly oriented educational parameters that categorize and stratify learners into groupings of academically promising versus students who are somehow challenged?

Authentic, Supportive Learning Spaces

I believe an obvious consideration stemming from what has been discussed and disclosed throughout my scholarly inquiry relates mutually to children and adults in education systems. Across numerous societal institutions (including education spheres), there is a direct benefit around fostering non-judgemental conversations with one another in a gesture of appreciation and understanding. Students are perceptive and astute as they evaluate the adults around them, looking for authenticity and attentiveness. Ungar (2013a) has stated that “The value of transformative youth-adult relationships is that they offer the most vulnerable youth a resource for well-being” (p. 334). We do know that educators or teachers can be powerful supporters and

advocates for students. Equally as powerful, however, are the unintentional actions, gestures, or remarks that can unknowingly or knowingly create and leave a lasting wound with just one glance or slight of phrase. We all hold individual power to change lives, for the better or for the worse, whether we realize it moment to moment or not. That said, there is a call for education systems to be adjusted or modified through inclusive education initiatives in support of student-centred pedagogies and educative experiences that are, in-practice, anti-oppressive and empowering for students and staff alike.

Positive Identity Comes from Positive Environments

Stated before, the main themes stemming from collage description narratives trace back to trauma, resilience, and the importance of relationship. But perhaps a theme of *change* can also be noted. This theme or pattern of change can be seen across student identity development as identity can either be negatively or positively oriented and acclimatized based on the environment the student is in; the type and tone of messages received being foundational and pivotal to whether a student learns to value themselves or whether they feel inadequate and disempowered through negative messaging. Mentioned in earlier discussions of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), there can also be a “paradox of change” in terms of how difficulty and weakness can transform people for the better or stronger, because of adversity. As Cooperrider and Fry (2020) explain, “This is the difficult paradox inherent in situations where change, resilience, and renewal are needed most ... those moments when we feel the weakest or trapped in deeply cynical conversations ... we are being asked to change!” (p. 270). I believe this paradox of change is what was witnessed in participant accounts. We saw that transformation is possible, and perhaps even more feasible, in the face of adversity because it brings someone to an awareness of what is psychologically uncomfortable and unsustainable, which can provoke

positive change; there is a questioning of purpose and a reach for something else, something more hopeful. As Mary has stated, “another future is possible.” Therefore, it can be ultimately said that change is dynamic and unpredictable because it depends often on unplanned or unintended circumstances. And depending upon the person and how they interpret and make meaning from difficulty, weak moments can paradoxically propel someone toward striving for their version or definition of success.

Words Hurt: Liability

While it can be said that adversity and hardship can sometimes translate into positive change and development, words can hurt and can lead to damaging personal impressions in the short and long term. Given that my study has looked at the concerns related to the tenets of deficit-based pedagogies, I want to speak about the concerns of using deficit-based language to address and *story-o-type* children. Notably, we have heard Mary describe her experience of being referred to as a *liability*. This logic was used to justify her being transitioned into an alternative school. The online Oxford English Dictionary (2023) defines liability as “a person or thing whose presence or behaviour is likely to cause embarrassment or put one at a disadvantage.” While the Cambridge Dictionary (2023) cites liability as “something or someone that causes you a lot of trouble” Thus, from accessing these definitions of “liability,” there are obvious negative connotations that frame the word. When using this word (liability) to define a student, or anyone for that matter, it can serve to damage self-impression and self-esteem as it marginalizes through its intent to degrade and reduce someone based on their worst characteristics or circumstances. Moreover, definitions of liability translate into someone “causing trouble, embarrassment, and disadvantage” and are obviously not hopeful or respectful. Furthermore, to refuse service to a student based on insufficiencies and shortcomings is a human

rights issue while also being overtly inequitable, oppressive, and dismissive. It is the responsibility and obligation of public education to serve all students respectfully and equitably, under the commitments of recently enacted *Inclusive Education* frameworks and policies in Canada and namely in the Provinces of New Brunswick (2013) and Nova Scotia (2019).

Inclusive education mandates are meant to properly address and care for students based on their needs; they are student-centred policies that acknowledge the dignity and worthiness of every student honouring their culture, orientation, and learning profile. As a counsellor hearing Mary explain that she was viewed as a “liability” for having health issues, it is deeply concerning, and it goes against the rights of the student as outlined within the tenets and policies of inclusive education. It seems that the ostracization Mary received is problematic and contrary to stated policy given that a health-related issue cannot be legitimately used to excuse someone from school. Considering specifically the messaging that Mary received indicating that she was a liability, in combination with the silencing of her voice, and the lack of care reported by her regarding her health issues, I was brought to the commitment of our federal and provincial governments who have officially provided and mandated schools become inclusive spaces.

Human Rights and Inclusive Education: Student-voice is Central

Inclusive education practices have been recognized, supported, and born out of initiatives and discussions within the United Nations (de Beco, 2022). In 2006, with the advent of the United Nations *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD), the international community has been called upon to establish a system that supports and protects the rights of disabled adults and children (Mason & Munn-Rivard, 2021; United Nations, 2006). This Convention has been strengthened by the establishment of the *United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (CRPD) which comprises a group of distinguished experts

and representatives who monitor, observe, and ensure fulfillment of the principles outlined in the CRPD Committee sessions that inform policy adopted by 193 countries and member states. The United Nations (2017) provides statements of concern with recommendations for member states to consider and address, as they advise:

Persons with disabilities continue to be systematically excluded from all areas of life. National laws and policies generally perpetuate exclusion, isolation, discrimination and violence against persons with disabilities, despite international human rights law standards. Factors such as deprivation of legal capacity, forced institutionalization, exclusion from general education, pervasive stereotypes and prejudices and lack of access to employment prevent persons with disabilities from enjoying their rights fully, on an equal basis with others. In particular, women and girls with disabilities face considerable restrictions on the exercise of their rights relative to men and other women and girls, due to, for instance violence, abuse or neglect, and have fewer opportunities in terms of education and employment. (p. 4)

As referenced, the UN CRPD makes recommendations specific to children as it advises member countries to invite and consult with children who experience disabilities, giving them autonomy of choice and allowing them to inform decisions that impact their lives (United Nations, 2017). While a specific definition underpinning the meaning of “disability” can vary, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Disabled Persons (1975) offers the following definition for clarity and guidance:

The term ‘disabled person’ means any person unable to ensure by himself or herself, wholly or partly, the necessities of a normal individual and/or social life, as a result of deficiency, either congenital or not, in his or her physical or mental capabilities (p. 1).

To use Mary's case as an example, her situation certainly falls under this definition, having at least one health related disability. She had also been arguably stereotyped or *story-o-typed* based on the circumstances of her family and the trauma that she has endured, which impacted her personal security and wellbeing, and thus impacted her mental health status putting her physical safety at risk.

As a result of UN initiatives, education systems have been called upon to develop inclusive education policies and approaches to ensure that all students receive equitable treatment and care. Often, however, the ideology and practice of inclusive schools is misunderstood, with mere lip service being paid to inclusion related policies in schools. Indeed, inclusive education initiatives are purported to be in place and adhered to within educational resources and marketing campaigns. Nonetheless, in practice, systems still exclude students who have divergent learning needs and considerations. De Beco (2022) offers discourse on what inclusion means in education, as he writes:

Inclusive education ... a kind of process through which the delivery of education is made to benefit all children. It is part of a 'struggle for much broader social justice' centred on the prerequisite for schools to accommodate pupils of different types. However, this approach may be equally flawed. It presumes that the schools can respond to any children's needs, whereas they may actually be unable to do so. (p. 1337)

I offer this background information on the underpinnings of the inclusive education model to underscore the issue of *educational stratification* that exists in schools and that participants in this study have reported on. Inclusive education is the expectation of schools today (2013 to current day) and it is particularly important in view of Mary's recent high school enrollment and her story of exclusion, which falls within the relatively recent period or enactment of inclusive

education policy. While in Carly and Ella's generation, consciousness was not where it is today, thus their experience(s) would have been part of a more segregated approach taken in schools that embraced streaming, exclusionary practices, and special education initiatives. Most provinces in Canada have been tasked with creating inclusive learning environments over the past decade or longer, yet we still see traditional, exclusionary models of education that remain intact in practice. Using Mary's case as a specific example, the high school she attended in New Brunswick just a few short years ago (2015-2018) has certainly fallen short of policy expectations, despite their published *Inclusive Education Policy*, enacted in 2013. Their *Policy Goal 5.1* cites:

Inclusive public education:

- Recognizes that every student can learn.
- Is universal – the provincial curriculum is provided equitably to all students and this is done in an inclusive, common learning environment shared among age-appropriate peers in their neighbourhood school.
- Is individualized – the educational program achieves success by focusing on the student's strengths and needs, and is based on the individual's best interest.
- Is requiring school personnel to be flexible and responsive to change.
- Is respectful of student and staff diversity in regards to their race, colour, religion, national origin, ancestry, place of origin, age, disability, marital status, real or perceived sexual orientation and/or gender identity, sex, social condition or political belief or activity.

- Is delivered in an accessible physical environment where all students and school personnel feel welcome, safe and valued. (Province of New Brunswick Policy 322, 2013. p. 4)

With clear parameters outlined above in the *New Brunswick Inclusive Education Policy*, and speaking to Mary's case as an example, her rights as a student were violated. The promise of educational supports was blatantly lacking at her neighbourhood school. The allowances cited in the policy for staff indicate flexibility; however, staff inflexibility was described by Mary given that the school counsellor was not allowed to see her, while the other school counsellor for grades 10 and 11 was unavailable given their part-time employment. Moreover, we have heard directly from Mary that she most certainly did not feel "welcome, safe, or valued," at her neighbourhood school, and her "strengths and needs" were seemingly dismissed in favour of highlighting and promoting her weaknesses (i.e., health and family concerns). Her perceived deficits were literally used to exclude her from attending her community high school. One could argue that by recommending she attend an alternative school where her needs could be better addressed, her community school fulfilled the established mandates of their inclusive education policy. It could also be argued, however, that further harm was done to her through overt streaming practices that justified re-locating Mary to an alternative school. The message that there was something wrong with her ties into an ableist lens in viewing and managing the needs of Mary. As Mary has said, "everybody has problems." Indeed, she is not alone or unusual in having health concerns to manage, but perhaps she was made to feel atypical or abnormal by the act of removal or dismissal from her community school that she had to endure. Have schools truly changed? Have they evolved over the past decade or two with the advent of inclusive education policies? It seems streaming is still very much a common practice. There does appear

to be a disconnect between stated inclusive education philosophies and values and how these values and expectations are put into practice. In practice, tendencies to judge, label, and exclude are very much intact within systems that purport student-centred, trauma informed approaches.

From my vantage as a school counsellor in public education in Nova Scotia, I am brought to my own experiences and concerns with how inclusive education policies have sporadically been introduced to schools and teaching staff, leading to much confusion and inconsistencies. The Province of Nova Scotia posted their *Inclusive Education Policy* (2019) online with the assumption that teachers would access the policy on their own time and know how to interpret and apply these ideologies and policies. Training and support have not been thorough or broad spanning in the roll-out of the inclusive education model. Thus, we currently have education systems that place inclusive education as an aspirational goal while, in practice, function as exclusionary whereby students are still being streamed into special classrooms or alternative schools. From my experience as a school counsellor in Nova Scotia, the deference to traditional or outdated practices is not the fault of the teacher; rather the system purports policy without professional development and training on these philosophies and practices, or without lending the proper influx of money and human resources to allow for meaningful change and truly empowering and inclusive educative spaces to take hold. De Beco (2022) speaks to this point as he writes:

While inclusive education was promoted at the global level, uncertainty remained with respect to the concept in question. Originally, it emerged as a reaction to the provision of special education in segregated settings. However, the consideration that disabled children should not be referred to special schools can be reductive. It does not ensure meaningful participation in the education system as it can result in segregation within

regular schools. If the purpose is simply to place these children in mainstream settings and then cater for them by providing separate lessons, the result is not inclusion.

Gradually, inclusive education has been regarded as being about the shortcomings of the education system itself. (p. 1336)

In view of recognizing that the education system has shortcomings and gaps that need to be adjusted or remedied, it is important to isolate the child from being viewed as part of the problem. Often children act out in school when something is weighing heavily on them not because they intend to be “difficult” but because they are hurting (Diggins, 2020; Howard, 2013; Loomis, et al., 2023). Teachers and school staff can benefit from focused training to respond to students and situations from a trauma-informed vantage. Indeed, to respond with gentle care, rather than reacting from punishing or penalizing attitudes and approaches. Teacher training that steps away from authoritarian approaches in recognition of the human side of teaching is the request. To acknowledge that children come from a myriad of backgrounds and value systems and have emotional responses tied to their experiences of trauma is the goal of truly inclusive pedagogical approaches. It is incumbent upon school faculty and staff to be aware of their innate judgements and biases. These judgements may be inaccurate because they cannot know what a child might have endured over their young life. The intent of inclusive education invites student voice to inform strengths-based pedagogies in recognition of the fullness of the child. The *Province of Nova Scotia Inclusive Education Policy* (2019) names in *Section 4* the following *Guiding Principles*:

4.1 Every student can learn with enough time, practice and equitable and responsive teaching.

4.2 Every student, including those with special needs, should receive full-day instruction every day, with flexibility based on the student's individual strengths and challenges.

4.3 Every student should be taught within a common learning environment (e.g., a classroom) with students of similar age within the community school, with flexibility that is based on, and responsive to, the student's individual strengths and challenges.

4.4 Inclusive education values, draws upon, and includes student voices and choices to assist students in achieving their goals.

4.5 Every student deserves to belong (affirmed, validated, and nurtured), be safe, and feel welcomed in all aspects of their daily experience.

4.6 Inclusive education is a commitment to honour and respect each student's cultural and linguistic identities and knowledge systems.

4.7 Inclusive education practices use evidence of students' strengths and challenges to determine a system of supports and monitor the effectiveness of those supports.

4.8 All partners are committed and empowered to work collectively to identify and eliminate barriers that interfere with students' well-being and achievement. (p. 2)

Principles 4.4, 4.5, 4.6, and 4.7 state an explicit request to honour the child and invite their voice, their values, and their perspective, in order to create meaningful educative experiences that consider the lived experiences of the child. How can we properly educate students when we don't know who they are, what they have experienced, or what they need to feel valued and safe? Gone are the days of the authoritarian teacher as we embrace and move toward truly empowering educative spaces where all students feel safe and feel that they belong. Gone are the days of the 'banking' model of education where the teacher "deposits" information into the child (Freire, 2000, p. 72). The education of today is intended to be a co-creative process between teacher and

student in which both are mutually learning from one another. To assist with this shift, however, professional development is required for teachers and staff for a consistent and thorough rollout of the inclusive education model, allowing it to be the new standard in public schools.

Messaging Coming from Privilege May be Invalid for the Marginalized

Opinions or *story-o-typing*, clearly seen and established within this study, extend from personal value systems and experiences. Perhaps if a child comes from a home that is steady and safe, or if they do not have any learning challenges or need extra supports, they too can expect a positive high school experience. If someone, however, presents with challenges or a way of being that is mislabeled or misunderstood – if they are different in some way or labelled deficient or inadequate, according to a prescribed set of norms and expectations – their experience of high school could likely be more challenging. Privilege can skew perspective. Those working in education systems can benefit from an awareness of bias to help them understand their positioning of privilege and how this can prevent a fuller or deeper understanding of the student and their needs. There is no common or universal positive experience of high school. Many students who are disadvantaged or marginalized for one or many reasons will struggle in school because systems of education have been structured based on privileged expectations, values, and worldviews.

Schools Can Help Heal Trauma

Trauma producing schools need strategies to care for students and to prevent activation of stress-responses and re-traumatization of students with ACEs (Petronne & Stanton, 2021). Trauma producing schools often miss opportunities to “heal trauma,” as it has been recognized that:

- (1) that students may be in a survival mode in schools because of schools and (2) that schools can create a safe environment by attending to particular interactional styles

without attending to deeper systemic, trauma-producing issues like institutionalized racism, classism, and homophobia embedded in curricula, school policies, and state-mandated assessments, as well as historical legacies of oppression connected to schooling. (Petroni & Stanton, 2021, p. 540).

Trauma Informed Schools

I have encountered so many children through my work as a school counsellor who unfortunately share many of the same challenges and experiences that were discussed by participants in my inquiry. I have likewise witnessed the school system and those in it to be unaware of the trauma that is potentially driving student behaviour and the reactions they have or the choices they make. I have often seen sole emphasis placed on the academic achievement of the child, to the exclusion of considerations to ensure their wellbeing and safety. Indeed, wellbeing and safety are necessary ingredients for a child to be fully present (physically and emotionally) and able to learn. Taking a holistic account of the child in full view of their needs seems like a missed premise. Instead, education systems tend to view children through a narrow lens that compartmentalizes them by exclusive focus on their academic learning profile, rather than assisting them in creating homeostasis within all parts of their being which also takes account of their family life and circumstances and their overall lived experience. The evaluation of the whole child is important and essential if we are to properly instruct them and attend to their needs. Wellbeing needs to be established first for a child to settle into learning. To ensure full, holistic care of the child, partnerships with all service providers (health, social, family, community, education) to assess them holistically are advantageous, allowing and ensuring that every child has the support they need to thrive, and to feel safe and valued. In contrast, when we magnify personal problems and challenges within the child, rather than help them cultivate their

unique gifts and strengths, we help to create an inner environment in the child that promotes shame, heightened emotional arousal, and potential toward injurious thoughts and actions. Thus, a pattern of self-destructive or self-sabotaging behaviors can be expected from someone who has experienced devaluation in some capacity (Callan, et al., 2014).

Wathen, et al. (2023) have scanned the landscape of trauma exposures in North American society and claim that "...trauma exposure is widespread, and the impacts can be (though are not always) severe and long-term ... (p. 261). In Canada, Wathen et al. (2023) cite Van Ameringen et al., 2008 who claim that, by the time people reach adulthood, 76 percent of Canadians have experienced a traumatic event. With this statistic probably being even higher now, given the recent COVID-19 pandemic, systems need to be mindful of the high prevalence of trauma experienced over the Canadian population, and over our global society. Wathen et al. (2023) use the work of scholars in the field of trauma (Elliot, et al., 2005; Ponc, et al., 2016; Wathen & Varcoe, 2019) to construct a universal framing outlining the principles of *Trauma- and violence-informed care (TVIC)*, which "... expands on TIC/P [Trauma Informed Care/Practice] to account for the intersecting impacts of systemic and interpersonal violence and structural inequities on a person's life, emphasizing both historical and ongoing violence and their traumatic impacts" (p. 262). I use the TVIC guiding principles offered by Wathen et al. (2023) and taken from their work in a verbatim quote below to clarify effective trauma responses which outline universal standards for development of policy and practice in schools. Trauma and Violence Informed Schools:

1. understand structural and interpersonal experiences of trauma and violence and their impacts on peoples' lives and behaviors;

2. create emotionally, culturally, and physically safe spaces for service users and providers;
3. foster opportunities for choice, collaboration, and connection; and
4. provide strengths-based and capacity-building ways to support service users. (p. 262)

TVIC principles encapsulate and express the values of strengths-based pedagogies, culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogies, anti-oppressive pedagogies as they are explicitly person- or student-centred. TVIC principles nicely package, condense, and summarize the essential elements of various strengths-oriented paradigms noted above, and they can be used as a straightforward, tangible, and valid approach to creating student-centred educative spaces. An important feature of TVIC also recognizes that teacher wellbeing is integral to the successful application of these principles, as “TVIC also attends closely to the well-being of those providing care, with a focus on VT [vicarious trauma]/secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue” (p. 262). Indeed, teachers need to feel nurtured, valued, and cared for before they can offer this same care to students.

Trauma Producing Schools

It seems from personal participant accounts, and likewise acknowledged and discussed in scholarly discourse, that sometimes teachers and school administrators are unable to recognize how their own response to students, who have often experienced complex and cumulative trauma, can be trauma producing. Bearing witness to Mary’s, Carly’s, and Ella’s stories, we have at least have three examples of cases where there appears to be a lack of compassionate understanding. Trauma *reducing* schools recognize the importance of unconditional positive regard, student voice and empowerment within personal decision making, and the building of trust and rapport (Petroni & Stanton, 2021). Training for educators to help them recognize the

markers and manifestations of trauma within the child would be advantageous and negate the production and perpetuation of additional unintended trauma in schools. What comes to mind as I think about Mary's, Carly's, and Ella's storied experiences is how they were seemingly quite alone as they attempted to negotiate their school lives. Children who experience many layers of trauma, compounded over a number of issues and incidents (i.e., parental, familial, social, societal, legal, educational, psychological, and biological, etc.) need trauma-informed responses from educators who have an awareness of how student behaviours and their automatic reactions are so often tied to trauma.

Streaming

It is the pledge of government and the right of all children to be supported, valued, and accommodated. As I reflect on participant stories, I am brought back to my own experience as a child in public education systems in the 1970s and 1980s where, at the elementary and junior high levels, I too was streamed/stratified into classes with children who were deemed academically or behaviourally challenged. To this point, children know when they are being treated differently and they know when they have been pigeonholed or deemed somehow lacking or deficient. This judgement of capability at such an early age is the type of *story-o-typing* that impacts someone and stays with them. Even in adulthood, negative messaging acquired in youth holds on and serves to undermine confidence and self-worth. If I am being honest, I would say that I am still trying to prove my capability and worth by achieving a doctoral degree. Perhaps when it is achieved, I will be able to dispute the *story-o-typing* of my youth in release of the discouraging messaging of yesteryear. My point in saying this on behalf of Mary, Carly, Ella, and myself, is to corroborate and authenticate how the judgements placed upon students while they are attending school acts to weaken and undermine the enthusiasm and potential one should

feel in youth. Limiting judgements from adults can set the tone for students because *outside-in* stories are taken up by the innocent and often believed (in the short and sometimes long term). External messaging informs the *inside story* as students take on, absorb, and play out the impressions of others or those who position themselves as wise experts. Yet for those who embrace a “paradox of change,” as discussed earlier, sometimes difficulty can drive determination to prove the naysayers wrong, with personal ideologies of success being pursued and achieved in the long term. But what about those students who believe the experts? What happens to someone who believes they are not capable? To this point, I recall a client of mine seen in the early days of my counselling career. I believe this client was 40 years of age and she felt unable or unequipped to work. She came to me chronically sick and, as we were discussing her history, she disclosed that she had been advised of having learning disabilities and, therefore, could not advance toward a job or career. She expressed to me that she was afraid to try school again because of her previous negative school experiences. Told in her youth that she had a learning disorder that prevented her from achieving success, she was fearful of school. This is but one personal account or example of many other possible stories portraying just how deep damage can penetrate from school-oriented messaging. It so often paralyzes the person in prevention of their full development and quality of life.

Alternative Schools: A Form of Educational Streaming/Stratification

Mary’s story is a recent example that serves to highlight practices of streaming in our modern education system. Public education systems purport that they no longer stream children, but personal stories disprove this claim. As we have heard, Mary was asked to attend an alternative high school. I have personally had exposure to an alternative high school in the Halifax area where I worked as a school counsellor. While I recognize the value of offering

students a school with smaller enrollments and more support services, alternative schools, by definition, assert that someone does not fit or belong in regular programming or schooling. Alternative schools stream and sequester students into an environment where they often feel or believe they are problematic or deficient in some way. In saying this, I reference the promise cited in the New Brunswick Inclusive Education Policy (2013) which states the "...learning environment [is] shared among age-appropriate peers in their neighbourhood school." It appears that with this formal pledge, education systems understand the benefit and importance of maintaining students in their neighbourhood school. Why have alternative schools then if policy speaks to students being maintained and supported in their neighbourhood school? Alternative schools exist because they are funded by government therefore highlighting the disconnect between what is said and what happens in practice. In in Mary's case, she was offered a label of "liability" instead and excused from her home school. Cast away to a new environment where she felt largely distressed, as she expressed it was a school for "all the sh** shows."

Disempowered Teachers

From all storied accounts, while also in keeping with my own professional experiences, it appears stress within the teaching profession is high. With time constraints factoring into how curriculum is delivered in schools, tensions exist in schools where teachers must work within a paradox of expanding minds in systems that are narrowly oriented, fear-oriented, and restrictive. Experiencing the education system as it is, I question whether teachers ultimately feel safe and at ease in their work. As I ponder this question, I recall my own experiences and conversations with colleagues, knowing firsthand the tensions and often impossible task of meeting the needs of every student in the building. Indeed, shortcomings in this regard are not the fault of the teacher. Facilitating and embodying inclusive approaches is often an impossibility due to the structure of

the system and the time constraints, lack of funding and supports, staff shortages, et cetera. Teachers are required to work efficiently toward curriculum outcomes as well as within the contradictory principles of inclusive education and cultural and linguistical responses to student-centred learning, which asks that teachers support every student where they are, at a pace that is best for them (the student). To be all things to all students is a huge feat and a daunting task to be sure. Are teachers able to be human in this kind of climate? Are their human needs honoured in a system with conflicting mandates? Do they have the proper support for themselves related to wellbeing and morale? Do they have a grasp of their own emotional regulation as they attempt to steady themselves within challenging workplace environments? As I reflect over these questions, I underscore the point that, as education systems intrude upon the professional discretion of their workforce, and when teachers, or counsellors in this case, function within silos that restrict their ability to respond to the unique and individual needs of students, oppression over student and teacher populations is perpetuated and compounded. And reflecting on Mary's story, while it is comforting to learn in her case that the counsellor did offer her support after school hours, I have no doubt this partial extension of care was knowingly inappropriate for the counsellor perhaps causing her undue stress. Indeed, the lack of permission given to the counsellor to assess and attend to student needs as they present to her would have created tension around her ethical responsibilities and scope of practice. The prohibitive confines negating adherence to her professional counselling code of conduct being inappropriate and problematic. As a counsellor she was ethically compromised given that she was not permitted to see students in blatant need solely because they fell outside of the grade level she was assigned.

When teachers or counsellors are disempowered in their work, this can be incredibly demoralizing, spilling over to create disempowered young people who are underserved and left

feeling as though they do not matter. This phenomenon has been seemingly understood by public education systems as they have responded to the call to better serve and support all students and staff through an enactment of inclusive education policies. Yet public education systems still seem stuck within an old paradigm in practice. What we see is a contradictory system that asks teachers to be student-centred in theory, however in practice the lack of professional development and discretion maintains a system that in reality is misleading and short-sighted.

Organizational Vigilance, Leaders to Champion Wellbeing and Collaborative Change

Given the volatile climate of society, we have seen many local and global crises intensifying, especially over the past three years, creating a consistent sense of heightened stress, anxiety, and insecurity. From the global COVID-19 pandemic to the increase of natural disasters such as forest fires, flooding, larger and more frequent storms caused by climate change; community violence resulting in mass casualties in Nova Scotia; civil unrest and blatant incidents of racism and intolerance; inflation, economic and food insecurity, housing shortages and homelessness; and most recently the regional wars in Ukraine and Israel that have worsened international tensions and bring an increased threat of global war; it is apparent that we are in a period of acute and broad spanning crisis. Considering past, current, and possible future upheaval, organizations are tasked with monitoring the state of flux and responding appropriately. Organizations need to be vigilant in their constant monitoring and assessment of the tides and ready to respond with preparedness to any crisis or change that may present (Schoemaker & Day, 2020). In reference to a recent study conducted by Schoemaker and Day (2020) they hypothesized that vigilant organizations respond better to change with the following elements being properly attended to:

(a) a leadership commitment to sensing and acting early on signals of change, (b) strategic investments in foresight abilities, (c) a flexible approach to incorporating uncertainty in their strategy processes, and (d) clear accountability and coordination for sharing information and acting on weak signals. (p. 1)

The results of their study reveal or isolate two conditions that should be broadly considered and applied to most organizations managing change: "... investment in foresight ... followed by leadership commitment" (Schoemaker & Day, 2020, p. 1).

Foresight and monitoring of the current and forecasted upheaval allows for agility of organizational response to effectively communicate, care for, and service membership. As educators serving so many students of diverse backgrounds, extra care and attention must be paid to support them as they help students and themselves negotiate social, cultural, societal, and family issues. In these times of crisis, recent realizations have unearthed the deep inequities and injustices of those most vulnerable in society. With all of this chaos and concern and with the disproportion and disparity of suffering within vulnerable and marginalized populations uncovered for all to see, maintaining the status quo does not allow for organizational agility or quick responses to the problems at hand. It is likewise an impossibility to ignore and unsee what we have seen and now know to be true. There has never been a time more important to work together to extend care to one another, especially the children, the elderly, the impoverished, the ill, and those who have endured long standing racism and bigotry. During these times of increased need, the time is now to fully support those who are on the front lines in schools, including those who teach, protect, and serve children with consideration and care. The call then is for educational organizations and those in leadership to support teachers and staff who are on the front lines so that they can endure the personal and community hardship and uncertainty with

proper attention, care, and understanding, thus sustaining others in times of difficulty (Beames, et al., 2021; Leland & Murtadha, 2011; Tranter, et al., 2018).

Truly healthy school communities and organizations are nurturing for everyone (Tranter, et al, 2018). They inspire people toward positive wellbeing and change by taking progressive and brave steps to create emotionally healthy, creative, and stress-reducing spaces where students and teachers feel as though they are at ease and belong (Latane, 2021; Tranter, et al., 2018). Systems often call for the fostering of wellbeing and the need to assist in the emotional regulation of children, but part of this equation requires the emotional regulation of school adults and teachers as well. Indeed, it is the adults in schools that model appropriate behaviours for children and emotional and physical homeostasis is needed for all in order to effectively build and sustain wellbeing and healthy relationships. The wellbeing of the teacher, after all, sets the climate for a well adjusted, safe, and contented workforce and school (Berkovich, 2018; Tranter, et al., 2018). Thus, establishing quality relationships continues as a theme in educational leadership discourse as scholarly opinion points to school leaders and teaching professionals who work cohesively and collaboratively together, especially during the challenging times we find ourselves in. To make this effective, solid support and partnering between school administrators, who honour all teaching voices, is the recommendation (Leithwood, et al., 2020; Naylor, 2023; Sullivan, 2013), to set the tone and to ensure teacher wellbeing, in protection of burnout and to protect staff morale, providing the foundation for feeling safe and respected as people and professionals (Berkovich, 2018). Leithwood, et al. (2020) speak directly to the importance of school leadership in creating this sense of safety and trust by fostering positive relationships, teamwork, and cohesion within the school community. They write:

School leadership has a significant effect on features of the school organization which positively influences the quality of teaching and learning. While moderate in size, this leadership effect is vital to the success of most school improvement efforts. (p. 6)

Sullivan (2013) speaks to the modern-day shifting leadership climate, where leaders could release the literal epithet of *leading* and instead inspire change through collaborative communities. He expounds on this idea by issuing a call for authentic leadership as he continues, “Leaders directly and indirectly affect the lives of many. Leaders therefore have a moral obligation to change in the world for the common good” (p. 186). Within the leadership discourse, we can also note a theme being established where relationships and community are honoured. This idea is referenced as distributed leadership, discourse that calls for supportive communities where multiple partners take on team-oriented leadership responsibilities. Sullivan shares this idea as he purports,

Leadership theory has shifted focus from leaders and followers to a more communal understanding of the dynamics contained in leadership relationships. In leader development, this shift from the individual to the professional learning community has opened up opportunities to study sustainable distributed workplace leader development. Through its collaborative nature, leaders and followers who are actively involved in such self-renewing leadership relationships base their actions on achieving the common good. (p. 182)

In making distributed leadership a possibility and to effectively mentor others through change, equally important is the wellbeing and emotional health of principals and administrators who likewise need to be supported and emotionally sustained if they are to fully embody and support leading collaborative school communities through change (Leksy, et al., 2023; Metcalf &

Benn, 2013; Persson, et al., 2021; Sullivan, 2013). In doing this, all partners must work respectfully together or as Sullivan (2013) very clearly states, "...[the] leader and community are in a unified relationship." (p. 186). And, coming full circle, support from senior leaders, policy makers, and funding partners at the local and provincial education departmental levels is required (Naylor, 2023; Sullivan, 2013) for proper modelling and trust building across the entirety of the organization. An invitation for individual voice and collaboration from those who make up the organization is considered as a positive step that can be taken. Those at the very top who set the tone and expectations for the organization can invite voice to build trust and to create true change. Sullivan (2013) makes this final point as he shares, "organizational processes distribute leadership throughout the organization to a point where members personally experience the act of leadership within their own specialization. ... This process creates the opportunity for all to feel empowered [and] to lead and change" (p. 195). With that said, thoughtful leadership combined with group think and opportunities for dialogue, listening, and hearing all members of an organization, can effectively distribute leadership and positively contribute to appropriate organizational sustainability in times of complexity.

Lack of Services

Students who attend public schools do not need an invitation to attend. The education system is there because students exist. It is the mandate of public education to intake all students in their catchment area and serve them appropriately, equitably, and fully. As a counsellor who has accompanied many students through emotional upheaval and difficulty, much sorrow and guilt creeps in for me as I have accompanied participants through their stories. Hearing participant accounts takes me back to my own role in schools as a counsellor where there was so much need to meet and not enough time in the day to properly address the need of every student

who was struggling. My fellow counselling peers and I would frequently exchange frustrations at the difficulty we faced in meeting student needs. Given the growing number of students who require or who regularly seek school counselling services, we know the current level of mental health services in schools is underserving students, while there are undoubtedly countless students who remain silent yet need help. There are others who have fallen through the cracks or are missed. Undoubtedly, students need more from school counsellors. The story from Mary demonstrates and personalizes this concern. My concern regarding lack of school counselling services also traces back to the lack of staffing and the expectations placed on teachers, counsellors, and other school specialists who are required to attend to hundreds of students simultaneously. It simply cannot be done well in current circumstances, if at all, to the degree necessary.

Mental Health Issues Addressed by School Located Personnel

Echoed through participant narratives, there is a reported lack of emotional wellbeing services in our education and healthcare systems. When children face a shortage of appropriate care and attention, emotional distress can lead to physical safety concerns and an exacerbation of symptoms. Moreover, extra stress is placed on families who must manage the heightened emotional needs of their children largely on their own. And, when families advocate for their children in an attempt to access systems that have limited resources, heightened stress, anxiety, and hopelessness can result when help is not timely or readily available.

Often schools are viewed as a catchall for managing student wellbeing. Yet schools, like healthcare, are stretched thin. Having a current ratio of one school counsellor per 400-500 students in the Nova Scotia education system means having a skeleton staff. Similarly, healthcare, like education, is showing increased strain, making it almost impossible to get timely

care. And to manage the volume of need, mandates that keep clinicians to strict schedules in an attempt to keep up with the volume of patients paradoxically does not permit adequate time for extended conversations and care. From all of this we are then left with children/students and adults who become sicker and grow more wary because adequate care is not possible in this climate. So, what can we do in the meantime to sustain people?

In Nova Scotia, Kutcher, et al. (2013) discuss a *School Based Model of Care Pathway* approach that was created and introduced in 2009. This model asks that we “address adolescent mental health through facilitating an holistic collaborative framework including educators and health care providers within the context of a secondary school setting” (p. 92). This program is promising and permits educators and healthcare to work alongside one another in schools. Applying this model makes space for mental health clinicians, school counsellors, social workers, psychologists, nurses, and others accessible to one another within cohesive and supportive professional communities, with the aim of providing students and families with accessible holistic wraparound care. Providers would work cohesively as counterparts on interdisciplinary/interprofessional teams, offering comprehensive services in partnership with a multitude of school and community based mental health clinicians and specialists. While certainly a promising prospect and model of care, as this dissertation is being written, the implementation of this work has largely stalled. While school counsellors, social workers, psychologists, and specialists sometimes do work from the same school location, separation of services still exists, thus maintaining a broken system while perpetuating competition and confusion between clinicians; as well as misunderstandings and ethical concerns re: confidentiality, among other issues. Time constraints also complicate matters as does a lack of staff to fill these responsibilities and roles. While a *School Based Model of Care Pathway* could

work in practice, making it a priority would ensure students and families receive the immediate care they require. We certainly need action to meet with helpful solutions more than ever.

As I reflect on solutions, I must also admit that I am taken back to the stories offered herein that speak to personal distress, to feeling alone without full support, understanding, and advocacy. We hear Mary explain of how she maneuvered education, justice, and community service systems alone. She describes the physical difficulty of travelling to off-school locations for care, and she recounts the challenges she faced in her attempt to obtain an explanation and diagnosis for her fainting episodes. It seems logical to bring care to students by locating practitioners at school sites. We have the information, and we have the know-how, but human resource and financial commitments from government are required to make it happen.

Teacher-centred Pedagogies: Has Much Changed Over 30 Years?

As I reflect on the stories offered by participants, I see a theme coming from narratives relating to teacher-centred pedagogical approaches. In the 1980s Carly describes a bell installed by her teacher where students were required to summon their teacher by ringing it. This seems to be an awkward, passive approach to inviting student engagement. It appears, from Carly's account, the teacher stood apart from students making it difficult for them to feel comfortable in reaching out for help or assistance. While the number of students in her classroom was not offered, I would envision a special needs classroom having a smaller number of students than a typical classroom, making it easier for the teacher to attend to student questions or needs. Prior to the implementation of an inclusive education model a decade ago, Carly's narrative defines a classroom set-up that was teacher-centred and authoritarian. Rather than situating the student at the centre, Carly's story provides an example of how traditional models of education adhere to an authoritarian, teacher-centred classroom.

Mary's story comes thirty years later with inclusive education frameworks firmly in place, yet teacher-centred approaches are still very much the status quo in modern day education. Speaking specifically to Mary's description of her classroom seating, she describes the importance of feeling safe, which often relies upon her seating location in the classroom. Sensitive to her environment, she required a seat on the peripheral of the classroom to feel safe and secure. To this point, I recall one student I worked with back in 2009 who explained a similar need to me. He explained that if he was not seated at the back of the classroom with no one behind him, he could not concentrate. When I asked him why, he explained that he had been physically abused by his father and thus he had residual trauma stemming from his father hitting him from behind. This comes to mind as I hear Mary's story as she says, "I needed to watch everything around me." I mention this in relation to allowing students to define their needs, as opposed to maintaining a "teacher-knows-best" mentality. Student needs often go beyond mere preferences and relate to adverse experiences, previous traumas and/or sensitivities. Seating location can seem like a minor detail to a teacher, but for a student it can be important to creating ease and safety in the classroom. Something as trivial as where someone is seated holds immense importance to comfort within learning. In the release of teacher-centred educative spaces, inclusive education models allow for student-centred decision making to inform what is best for them.

Inclusive Education: Systems are Slow to Change

To revisit the wisdom and educational philosophies offered by historical emancipatory intellects, Dewey's (2009) ideology of co-creating meaningful learning experiences and Freire's (2000) belief that educator and student are equals, mutually learning from one another, are early examples of inclusive education frameworks. Additionally, Carl Rogers' (1961) person-centred

approaches translate well to inclusive education values and principles. Rogers believed that unconditional positive regard, empathy, and helping the student or client access their strengths is liberating and therapeutic. These scholars and philosophers have asked for change long ago, yet their requests for meaningful change in this regard have been slow to happen and take hold. Stories from Mary, Carly, and Ella, confirm this point as their experiences are decades apart, but alas each one of them has had mutually disempowering experiences in schools.

Study Conclusion and Implications

It can be said that the field of education ideologically sets the foundation for formal and informal curriculum delivery across every subject or discipline—the how and why we teach and the purpose, reserved for the subject under study. For those who educate the future educators, for the current and future pedagogues, the act or embodiment of teaching is arguably one of the greatest considerations. Perhaps it can be said that if curriculum is at the heart of pedagogy, then the pedagogical approach and style involved in curriculum delivery is the soul. Bass and Good (2004) offer an intriguing perspective on the goal of teaching as they look at the etymology of the word “education.” Latin origins of the word split off into two separate roots: *educare* and *educere*. *Educare* means to “train or mold” while *educere* means “to lead out;” two contradictory root meanings of word origins to be sure; yet, both are at play in our modern education systems.

Bass and Good (2004) go on to explain that,

One side [*educare*] uses education to mean the preservation and passing down of knowledge and the shaping of youths in the image of their parents. The other side [*educere*] sees education as preparing a new generation for the changes that are to come—readying them to create solutions to problems yet unknown. One calls for rote memorization and becoming good workers. The other requires questioning, thinking, and

creating. To further complicate matters, some groups expect schooling to fulfill both functions, but allow only those activities promoting *educare* to be used. (p. 162)

The current model of education most definitely resembles and promotes ideologies of *educare*, as it purports allegiance to inclusive education models in theory but clings to conventional models of education in practice. For those aligned with *educare*, my study and its findings will not be of much use. But for those who want and believe in progressive education and who support change for the betterment of all, especially the marginalized and disenfranchised, my study supports objectives related to *educere*. Indeed, my study sought “to lead out” others in fuller discovery of who they are; their voice, their thoughts, their values and aspirations, their uniquely authentic contributions to the world. It invited critical appraisal for the purpose of raising consciousness within unjust systems, as it punctuated disclosures of lived realities. A deliberate aim of my study was to name systemic prejudices and historical wrongs through very personal stories and circumstances; to bring to light the injustices perpetrated by *educationally stratifying* or marginalizing students, thus to advance transformation and change in public education. In doing this, my study embraced and celebrated the use of creativity and dialogue within pedagogy to demonstrate democracy in action and to harness independent thought and meaning making. It gave space for emancipatory conversations, imagination, and existential questioning. Results or study findings ultimately encourage or perhaps implore systems and people to be patient and kind with one another, especially as we assist impressionable children with their emotional formation and as they adapt and develop into ideally healthy, productive, and caring adults. My study demonstrates anti-oppressive educative practices in-action, in keeping with Kumashiro’s (2001) suggestion that we look to the posts (post-structural, post-modern, and post-colonial) as a way of discovering and creating strategies

that help us understand differing perspectives. Kumashiro (2001) also speaks of strategies “to recognize that teaching involves unknowability and that learning involves multiple ways of reading [knowing, learning, and being],” as he “...argues against making the common assumption that ... [education or schooling] has the same meaning to all students” (p. 46).

In closing, I have attempted to make the “unconscious conscious” (Britzman, 1998; Ellsworth, 1997; Kumashiro, 2000b, p. 46) by inviting *educationally stratified* thus marginalized students to comment on their experience in schools. To use Afuape’s (2020) mantra, “... knowledge is useless if it is not connected to possibilities for meaningful action,” (p. 430) Thus, I have taken participant stories and the findings outlined above to formulate suggestions for change. These practical suggestions relate to working with students in meaningful, relational, dialogical, creative, and anti-oppressive ways. These approaches and pedagogies request true pedagogical shift in education. They ask that educational systems support teachers and other staff, those who are on the frontlines, with in-depth training and development to equip them with strengths-oriented, anti-oppressive strategies to inform their work with children and youth. To this point, my study results and findings support the following extrapolations:

- Relationship-centred schools/communities support and heal.
- Student and teacher wellbeing is needed and comes before the ability to learn/teach/lead.
- Student-centred learning involves inviting student voice, values, abilities, preferences, and perspectives to inform meaningful educative experiences.
- Communication is personal and multidimensional – we speak with our bodies, our mouths, spiritually through signs and metaphor, and through creative expression. Language is more than spoken or written words.

- Resiliency prevails when caring adults form meaningful/supportive relationships with students and vice versa.
- Asset or strengths-based pedagogies harness strengths to teach the child and lead the teacher in pedagogical strategies.
- Student strengths and aptitudes are sometimes not tied to subjects taught in school. Many students can benefit from creative and practical or hands-on learning/subjects that tap into multiple-intelligences (verbal, mathematical-logical, musical, visual, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, et cetera) (Gardner, 1983, 2006).
- Children and youth come to school with one or multiple traumas or adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and need safe and understanding school spaces/adults. Children need help from understanding adults who have the insight and know-how to help them negotiate difficult emotions; Adult responses are trauma-informed and do not further complicate or contribute to traumatic stress responses.
- Cultivation of the inner world of children (mindfulness, spirituality, artistic/creative pursuits) can build confidence and connection to Self.
- The child is not the problem, the system is the problem: Negative behaviours do not define the child and can be tied to automatic trauma responses; Negative behaviours can relate to an indirect request for help.
- When privilege informs, it oppresses. Culturally and linguistically responsive educators know that personal values are tied to culture, background, family values, gender identity, sexual identity, interests, and used to inform meaningful personal definitions of school and life success.

- Social and emotional regulation starts with the adults/teachers/leaders before it can be modelled appropriately and delivered to students.
- Health and family issues can impede and complicate learning. School located, wrap-around support (health, community services, justice, etc.) is needed for professionals and clinicians to work cohesively and openly together forming caring communities in full support of students and their families.
- Marginalized/at-risk students need extra attention, advocacy, and mentorship. Their voice needs to be heard and taken seriously.
- Adequate support is lacking (mental health and inclusion). Traumatized students and complex cases need accessible and consistent care offered by a complement of on-site and community-based clinicians in supportive, cohesive professional communities.
- Trauma informed philosophies underpin education policies and pedagogies. Everyone who serves children can benefit from trauma-informed coaching. Trauma-informed philosophies, responses, and practices inform emotionally safe and healing schools.

The above considerations are taken from the breadth of this inquiry: the literature review; insights gleaned from participant stories; processes of representation; the interpretation of results; and from my personal and professional reflexivity and experience. These considerations form a large list of points that can be distilled down to an important, essential element: human connection/relationship. *Relationship* forms the essence of life. My study at least supports this notion and argues that the central purpose or objective of education ought to prepare students for the fulfilment of their multidimensionality and holistic potential, starting with the establishment of quality attachments and relationships. Aiding students toward discovery of their full human potential through positive interactions and connections can help them accept and appreciate who

they are, in recognition of their innate worth and worthiness and in expansion of their unique strengths. After all, human development happens over a lifetime. Thus, possibility and potential exist for children and adults alike.

To educate for the purpose of *educere* reminds us that learning and teaching must be mutually communicative pursuits in settings established on principles of safety and trust. Both teacher and student are reliant on the quality of relationship to necessitate the quality of experience. This very idea was brought forward by Dewey in 1938 when he asked, “Are we creating meaningful educative experiences?” This inquiry responds to that question and contends that schools can do better. While no two people share the same life or circumstance, systems can be consistently and cohesively structured to support everyone. Hence, restructured to ensure that systemic values orient schools and the people in them toward philosophies and approaches that support positive, culturally responsive content in the fostering of relationships and wellbeing within students and teachers alike. This can be achieved when systems allow, invite, and cultivate the development of meaningful relationships via dialogue and understanding. Indeed, without relationship and understanding there can be no ease of communication.

Learning through *inclusive education philosophies* encourages people to acknowledge and diffuse their resistance to new thought. It is education between equal partners, offering encouragement and a reason to learn in full acceptance of everyone and in support of human strengths. It allows for oppositional responses and understands that resistant reactions are often a natural part of the learning process. It does not penalize opposing views or ways of being. It instead summons gentle dialogue, perseverance, and perspective while it asks for a release of bias. It understands that opinions sometimes do not change quickly, immediately, or at all. Change instead involves a *democratic process*. The idea of *relationship* over this positioning

encourages mutual dialogue in discovery of ourselves and others. Afuape's (2020) words frame this sentiment so well, as she writes, "... 'true' dialogue is not the transfer of knowledge from one person to another, but a non-hierarchical interaction where all parties learn. (p. 430).

Suggested Future Research

Given the small data set used over my study, future research may include larger numbers of participants to obtain additional layers of information and perception of *educational stratification*. Future studies would be beneficial to glean insight into how the over performing, gifted, or accelerated student perceives their experiences of upward or academically oriented streaming. Do they feel pressured to pursue academic success because they are deemed capable? How do they cope with higher levels of expectation? Do they have tendencies toward perfectionism? How does upward streaming impact student wellbeing and mental health? Moreover, how do teachers react to and perceive educational stratification practices? Do they recognize such practices as being potentially oppressive and marginalizing for some students?

Final Thoughts on Study Orientation

To be transparent and clear, throughout the fullness of this work I have discussed the inherent limitations tied to an intendedly subjective qualitative inquiry. Depending on one's positioning as a scholar, limitations can be viewed as either weaknesses or strengths. For those who value traditionally oriented objective knowledge production, those in the positivist camp, my study is inherently flawed from its beginnings. For some, my study could be viewed as technically cluttered and perhaps confused as it fits together competing paradigms and draws from post-structural methodologies and methods. It admittedly has many tensions in construction. Yet, these same tensions, when viewed synergistically, can also be seen as strengths – each component, each prism of the crystal, fusing together to radiate insight and

understanding when viewed in the proper light. For those who value traditional, concrete, linear approaches, this study stands in contrast to convention given it is consistently inconsistent, thus deliberately creative. With flexibility, an emergent design, creative praxis, and a commitment to anti-oppressive pedagogies and research approaches, this study placed the safety and comfort of participants above all other priorities. It drew and relied upon the body of scholarly discourse available to support marginalized students. In doing this, it optimistically stands as an example of possibility in the generation of knowledge. It is flexible and responsive to the participant in the true spirit of student-centred pedagogies. In keeping with anti-oppressive methodologies, study findings ask that we break-free of drawing predictive conclusions and thus allow the participant/student to discuss and interpret what holds meaning and possibility for them. Hence, this study is meant to be ontologically provocative and epistemologically fitting to the circumstances of the educationally stratified who leave high school in emotional/psychological, social, and economic disadvantage. It stands in honour and acknowledgement of those who have been silent yet need to be heard.

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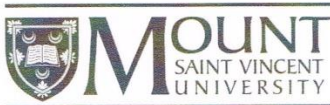
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Appendix A

Ethics Clearance



*University Research Ethics
Board (UREB)*

Certificate of Research Ethics Clearance

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Clearance	<input type="checkbox"/> Secondary Data Clearance	<input type="checkbox"/> Renewal	<input type="checkbox"/> Modification	<input type="checkbox"/> Change to Study Personnel
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Effective Date	<u>March 3, 2022</u>	Expiry Date	<u>March 2, 2023</u>
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File #:	2021-183
Title of project:	Academically marginalized students reflect on their experience in schools – An arts-based inquiry
Researcher(s):	Jacqueline Greenough
Supervisor (if applicable):	Ardra Cole
Co-Investigators:	n/a
Version :	1

COVID-19 - Researchers are reminded that they and their research team must abide by all **Public Health** directives and **MSVU** requirements ([Resumption of Human Research \(msvu.ca\)](https://www.msvu.ca/resumption)) regarding in-person contact with participants. In-person research requires **additional** clearance and may not proceed until the second level clearance is obtained.

The University Research Ethics Board (UREB) has reviewed the above-named research proposal and confirms that it respects the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* and Mount Saint Vincent University's policies, procedures and guidelines regarding the ethics of research involving human participants. This certificate of research ethics clearance is valid for a period of **one year** from the date of issue.

Researchers are reminded of the following requirements:	
Modification to Protocol	Any changes to approved protocol must be reviewed and approved by the UREB prior to their implementation. Form: REB.FORM.002 Info: REB.SOP.404 Policy: REB.POL.003
Changes to Research Personnel	Any changes to approved persons with access to research data must be reported to the UREB immediately. Form: REB.FORM.002 Info: REB.SOP.404 Policy: REB.POL.003
Annual Renewal	Annual renewals are contingent upon an annual report submitted to the UREB prior to the expiry date as listed above. You may renew up to four times, at which point the file must be closed and a new application submitted for review. Form: REB.FORM.003 Info: REB.SOP.405 Policy: REB.POL.003
Final Report	A final report is due on or before the expiry date. Form: REB.FORM.004 Info: REB.SOP.406 Policy: REB.POL.003
Privacy Breach	Researchers must inform the UREB immediately and submit the Privacy Breach form. The breach will be investigated by the REB and the FOIPOP Officer. - Form: REB.FORM.015
Unanticipated Research Event	Researchers must inform the UREB immediately and submit a report to the UREB within seven (7) working days of the event. Form: REB.FORM.008 Info: REB.SOP.404 Policy: REB.POL.003
Adverse Research Event	Researchers must inform the UREB immediately and submit a report to the UREB within two (2) working days of the event. Form: REB.FORM.007 Info: REB.SOP.404 Policy: REB.POL.003

*For more information: <http://www.msvu.ca/ethics>

Daniel Seguin
Chair, University Research Ethics Board

Appendix B

List of HRM Mental Health Supports

The following supports are available to you free of cost. Please consider accessing these services should you need extra support in coping with difficult emotions.

Mental Health and Addictions Services

You can self-refer to a mental health or addictions clinic, service or program through the [Nova Scotia Health Authority](#).

Call toll-free: [1-855-922-1122](tel:1-855-922-1122) (Monday to Friday, 8:30 am to 4:30 pm)

Crisis Text Line

[Crisis Text Line](#) is available for adults who are going through a difficult time and need someone to text with. This service is free and available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Special support is available for frontline workers

Text NSSTRONG to 741741

Good2Talk Nova Scotia

[Good2Talk Nova Scotia](#) provides support for university and college students.

Call toll-free: [1-833-292-3698](tel:1-833-292-3698)

Text GOOD2TALKNS to 686868

Provincial Mental Health Crisis Line

If you're experiencing a mental health or addictions crisis, or are concerned about someone who is, the Provincial Mental Health Crisis Line is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Call toll-free: [1-888-429-8167](tel:1-888-429-8167)

Healthy Minds NS

[HealthyMindsNS](#) provides online mental health support for university and college students.

Counsellors and therapists are also available for free at academic institutions. Please contact the Student Services Department at your academic institution to schedule an appointment with a



Appendix C: Research Participation Informed Consent Form

Title: *Academically marginalized students reflect on their experience in schools – An arts informed inquiry*

Researcher(s): *Jacqueline Greenough, Faculty of Education,
Mount Saint Vincent University*

Supervisor(s): *Dr. Ardra Cole, Faculty of Education,
Mount Saint Vincent University*

You are invited to take part in a research project entitled “*Academically marginalized students reflect on their experience in schools – An arts based inquiry.*”

This form is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. It also describes your right to withdraw from the study. In order to decide whether you wish to participate in this research study, you should understand enough about its risks and benefits to be able to make an informed decision. This is the informed consent process. Take time to read this carefully and to understand the information given to you. The researcher, *Jacqueline Greenough*, will answer any questions you may have about the study or provide more information about the study before you consent.

It is entirely up to you to decide whether to take part in this research. If you choose not to take part in this research or if you decide to withdraw from the research once it has started, there will be no negative consequences for you, now or in the future. Any information collected from you will be immediately deleted or destroyed.

1. Introduction

I am a PhD student in the Inter-University Doctoral program at Mount Saint Vincent University. As part of my Doctoral (PhD) thesis, I am conducting research in educational studies under the supervision of Dr. Ardra Cole.

I am conducting this study because I am interested in learning more about your experiences in public school. I would like to hear about the messages you have received in public school and how these messages have influenced your self-esteem (i.e.- how you view your capabilities and how you feel about yourself). You will be asked to describe your school experience by making a collage picture. After your collage picture is complete you will be asked to explain it to a small group of research participants (up to four other research participants).

2. Purpose of study:

The main objective of this inquiry is to offer you (and a up to 4 other participants) an opportunity to describe your experience in public school. This study looks at students who meet the criteria for academic marginalization, which may include one or all of the following criteria: multiple high school course failures; attendance issues; missed time and/or school refusal over months or years; have one or more courses with an IPP (Individual Program Plan); a diagnosis of a learning disability; multiple suspensions or high school expulsion. Academic marginalization can happen when a student struggles in school, complicating achievement and school success. The goal is to understand how the public school system impacted your identity and self-esteem.

The purpose of conducting this inquiry is to gain insight into academic marginalization and how it has impacted you (i.e. - how you feel about yourself, your capabilities, and your future goals and pursuits). Your experience of academic marginalization is the overall purpose of this study which may serve to inform and possibly reform public school education practices.

3. What you will do in this study:

Part I: Collage Making (1.5 - 2 hours)

Collage making will begin the research process. It will be first of two exercises used to assist you in telling your story. Collage will be used to help you formulate your thoughts about your experience in schools. You will be asked to think about how you may have been stereotyped or “story-o-typed” by the system. Like stereotyping, “story-o-typing” can happen when someone assumes they know your story. Story-o-typing involves people making “... dynamic guesses about where we have come from in the past and where we are going in the future (Randall, 1995, p. 57).

After collages are finished, you will have the opportunity to show and describe your art to the group to explain how it came together and to describe your school experience.

Part II: Narrative Process (1 hour)

After a half-hour lunch, you will be invited to remain in the group for a more focused group conversation where you can go deeper into explaining your collage and your school story.

Possible questions posed in this phase may include:

- What messages from public education have been directed at you? What were they?
- How have these messages impacted you?
- How have these messages shaped your identity?
- How did school messages shape your idea of who you are and who you became or are becoming? What are your goals for the future?

4. Length of time:

It is expected that the entire research project from start to finish will take a maximum of 5 hours. The research project will begin at 9:30 am with the collage making exercise and a group show and tell allowing for you to explain your collage to the group. Lunch will be provided from 12:45 pm to 1:15 pm. A group dialogue will be the final exercise running for one hour from 1:30 pm to 2:30 pm.

5. Withdrawal from the study:

At any time during the research process, you have the right to withdraw your consent to participate in this study. To withdraw from the study, you may speak to the researcher in person about your intention to withdraw or you can send an email to the researcher indicating the termination of your participation (email: jacqueline.greenough2@msvu.ca). If you withdraw from the study, the researcher will delete and destroy any information already obtained from you and stop collecting additional information and data about you. There will be absolutely no consequences to you should you decide to withdraw from the study.

6. Possible benefits to the participant:

Benefits of participation in this study that may directly impact you, the participant, include:

- The opportunity to come to a greater understanding of your identity and how your participation in public school helped to determine who you are today.
- The opportunity to reframe your school story to something more positive and empowering.
- A greater understanding of how society and school shapes us.
- Your contribution may directly inform future changes to the school system.
- Your story may help and inspire others who have been academically marginalized.
- The opportunity to meet likeminded participants and to share personal experience.

Benefits to the scientific/scholarly community or society that may justify your involvement in this study:

- To be a part of a study that is the first of its kind in the study of academic marginalization and how this phenomenon impacts student identity.
- The opportunity to share your story with researchers, educators and those associated with public education systems.
- This study will add to the body of research literature within the field of education, serving to inform and inspire future related studies.
- To inform and possibly reform or change our schools into more inclusive spaces where students can be fully themselves and achieve and define success on their terms and live a life of their choosing.

7. Possible risks:

This study involves and invites you (the prospective participant) to describe your experience in school. If you consent to participating in this study you may experience emotional upset at the telling of your public school story. You could experience negative emotions which may impact your personal view of self and your self-esteem and/or view of the world. If this should happen you have the option of discontinuing the study and having your data destroyed. You also have the option of engaging in counselling to work through the negative emotions that may have been

activated (name of counsellors attached). Other risks of this study involve telling your story within a group format. This exposure to participant group members means that those present will know who you are (as far as having a visual of you) and they will hear your story. You will also be exposed to the stories of others in the group which may be upsetting. While you do not need to disclose your full-name to the group, you will experience a personal/physical exposure to other group members and them to you. Participant members will be asked to agree to keep what happens and what is said in the group confidential - any information obtained or heard within the group process must be kept strictly confidential.

8. Confidentiality

Confidentiality is of the utmost importance and will be maintained throughout this study process by ensuring that your real name is withheld and not used as an identifier. You will instead use a pseudonym (fake name) of your choice. Any data collected from you (collage and transcribed story) will not include your real name but instead your chosen fake name.

Collection of data will be in the form of your collage and through video recordings of the group collage making and dialogue. Your collage and words/story will be transcribed/printed in text and included in the finalized dissertation project. Again, your real name will not be used and your confidentiality maintained.

Collages, video recordings, and any electronic or printed transcripts will be stored on a computer with encrypted security and placed in a locked, secure filing cabinet throughout the research and dissemination process. Video recordings on the camera used for recording purposes will likewise be stored within the locked and secured filing cabinet. Once the data has been properly analyzed and transcribed, the video will be deleted immediately from the camera and the computer.

Your transcribed story/narrative and your collage will be permanently featured in the written dissertation. Thus, your story and collage will be a long-lasting marker of your participation in this research study. If you agree to being part of this study, you are consenting to your transcribed story and your collage being displayed in the dissertation/research project which can be accessed online in the holdings of the Mount Saint Vincent Library.

You should know and understand that there are limits to confidentiality. Disclosures of self-harm or harm to another must be reported to the appropriate authority for investigation and support. If you make these disclosures please expect that confidentiality will be broken in an effort to seek assistance. These disclosures include:

- You have harmed or have thoughts of harm to yourself and/or another person - to protect you or others, law enforcement officers or a physician may be contacted to keep you safe.
- There is cause to believe that a child has been or may be abused or neglected - the principle investigator is required to make a report to the appropriate child protection agency.

- There is cause to believe that an elderly or disabled person has been or may be abused, neglected, or subject to financial exploitation - the principal investigator is required to make a report to the appropriate adult protection agency.

9. Anonymity:

Whereas this study is small and involves a group process giving you exposure to fellow research participants, it will be extremely difficult to promise full anonymity. Although the researcher will safeguard the confidentiality of the discussion to the best of her ability, the nature of the focus groups prevents the principal investigator from guaranteeing that other members of the group will maintain the anonymity of other members. To ensure anonymity as much as possible, pseudonyms or fake names will be used. If you consent to your participation in this study you are agreeing to respect the confidentiality of the other members of the group by not repeating what is said or discussed in the focus group to others. You must also be aware that other members of the group may not respect your confidentiality even though consent will be sought from all participant members.

10. Recording of Data:

The group collage making and all parts of the group discussion will be video recorded. The reason for video recording the group research process is to take account of the dialogue or discussion within the group dynamic for the purpose of transcribing the dialogue into text or print so that your story can be told in the written dissertation project. A photograph of your finished collage will also be taken to appear alongside your printed story in the dissertation project.

11. Storage of Data:

Video of group dialogue/storytelling and a photograph of your collage will be taken on the personal camera of the principal investigator. Once the video data is recorded it will be transferred onto the personal laptop password protected computer of the principal investigator which is equipped with up-to-date security encryption software. The photo of your collage will be transferred to the laptop computer. The video and collage photograph will be deleted from the camera once it is safely located on the laptop computer.

While the video data is being analyzed and transcribed, the laptop computer will be stored, when not in-use, in a secured and locked filing cabinet in her private home with a home security system for extra protection. No one else will have access to the locked filing cabinet.

Once the data is analyzed, transcribed, and placed in the finished dissertation project, it will be deleted from the laptop computer. In keeping with REB data retention policies, a copy of the video data taken on the day of the study will be securely stored on a USB drive in a locked filing cabinet for a period of 5 years. When 5 years has lapsed, the video data will be deleted from the USB drive and the USB drive will be crushed for an added measure of security.

Participants can keep their collage art pieces or advise the principal investigator of their interest in having it shredded and disposed.

12. Reporting of Results:

Data is collected for the purpose of telling your public-school story. It will be collected electronically by video and photographic means to be transcribed, displayed, and discussed in the doctoral dissertation of the principal investigator. You are consenting to having your story directly quoted in the dissertation. The dissertation will be read by the principal investigators' Doctoral Committee (made up of three professors) and an external examiner. The dissertation will be public defending a members of the public will be invited to hear about the project. Once the dissertation is successfully publicly defended, it will be available to the academic community at MSVU and also in searchable databases in a variety of academic institutions and online through scholarly databases. By signing this consent form, you are agreeing to your data appearing in the finalized dissertation which will be available to the public as explained above.

13. Sharing of Results with Participants:

You will be invited to review the data once it is analyzed and recorded. For this purpose, when the dissertation is complete and ready for public defense, participants will be notified by email and given the opportunity to read the dissertation. You can be provided with a digital pdf copy of the dissertation or receive a copy by email. A printed copy can be mailed to you as well if preferred.

The academic community will be informed of the results of this study through the public defense of this dissertation project. The approved project may likewise appear in the MSVU Library holdings (print and/or online and can be searched and found here:

<https://www.msvu.ca/academics/library/>

Questions/Contact Information:

If you have questions at any time about this study, or you experience adverse effects as the result of participating in this study, you may contact the researcher whose contact information is provided on the first page.

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Mount Saint Vincent University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant, you may contact the MSVU Research Ethics Coordinator, Brenda Gagné at 902-457-6350 or brenda.gagne@msvu.ca

Consent:

Your signature on this form means that:

- You have read the information about the research.
- You have been able to ask questions about this study.
- You are satisfied with the answers to all your questions.
- You understand what the study is about and what you will be doing.

- You understand that you are free to withdraw from the study without having to give a reason and that doing so will not affect you now or in the future.
- You understand that any data collected from you up to the point of your withdrawal will be *destroyed* through shredding if in paper format, and deleted if in electronic format.

If you sign this form, you do not give up your legal rights and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities.

Please read carefully and check the boxes accordingly. Your signature is required below:

I have read what this study is about and understood the risks and benefits. I have had adequate time to think about this and had the opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered.

I agree to participate in the research project understanding the risks and contributions of my participation, that my participation is voluntary, and that I may end my participation at any point throughout the research process.

I am over the age of 19? Yes No

I am currently enrolled in a high school/adult diploma program? Yes No

I agree to be video-recorded during the *collage making / focus group* Yes No

I agree to have my verbal contributions transcribed (typed out and placed in the written research project/dissertation) Yes No

I agree to have my collage/artwork photographed and displayed in the research Project/dissertation Yes No

I would like to be contacted to have a final read of the project for accuracy and to provide final consent for my story and collage to appear in the dissertation Yes No

Signature of participant

Date

Participant email and phone number

I have explained this study to the best of my ability. I invited questions and gave answers. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in being in the study, any potential risks of the study and that he or she has freely chosen to be in the study.

Signature of Principal Investigator

Date

****Please retain a copy of this consent information for your records. This form will be kept in a locked and secure filing cabinet for up to 7 years by the principal investigator.**

Appendix D: Part I and II Research Questions

The intent of this project is to foster a comprehensive and holistic impression of the student to better understand how academically marginalized students internalize messages received from the school system and how this translates into their view of the world.

Overarching questions to be answered in this study are:

How do students perceive their experience in school?

To what extent were their needs met in school?

Given student impressions, what suggestions do participants have for improvements in learning environments?

To what extent did their impression inform their choice of career path?

How did their school experience inform their choice of career path or work/life decisions?

Part I (Collage Making) Questions:

Participants will be asked to reflect on how they view the systemic bias at work in school systems and how it has impacted their schooling and identity. They will have the opportunity to respond through collage and narrative methods to question how they been story-o-typed over their school careers; they will be offered the opportunity to decide for themselves whether their experience of academic marginalization is in fact a personal truth (something they believe about themselves as deserved) or a fiction created by the action of story-o-typing them. Randall (1995) makes this very point as he poignantly writes,

We have seen how our ‘self’ is in many respects a fictional construction; a house of anecdotes, a tangle of tales, a web of stories that we tell ourselves, and/or internalize from others, about our past, present, and future. As these stories change, we change. (p. 234)

The main question(s) posed to participants to get them closer to their stories through creation of their collage will be:

How would you represent your experience in schools?

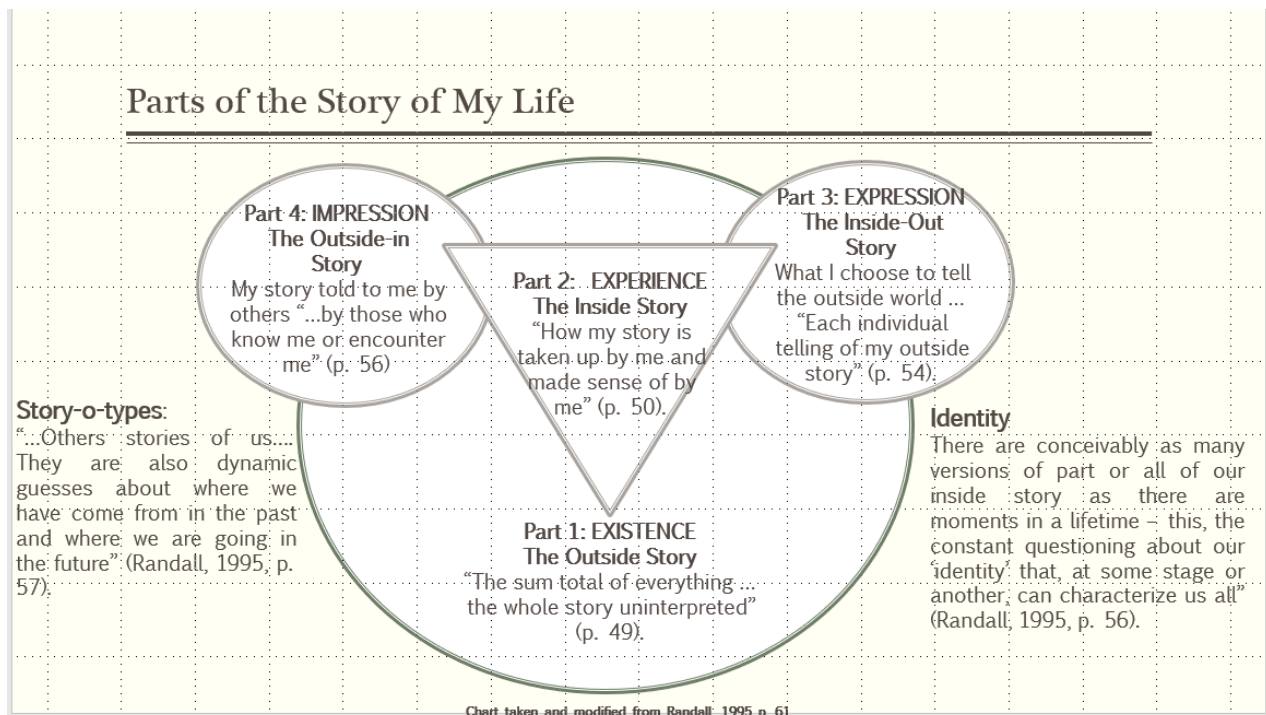
How would you represent the school systems interpretation of you? Do you believe this interpretation was/is accurate?

Please highlight your impression of experience as you focus on authentic, aesthetic collage expression.

Part II: Randall’s (1995) Outside-in Story: Group Process

The second phase of the research will offer participants the opportunity to reinterpret their original designs, perhaps allowing for more in-depth interpretation of story and identity development. A visual of Randall’s (1995) levels of story (reproduced below) will be shown and

explained to participants to offer them an explanation of the levels of story discussed in group process.



As you will notice, there are four levels of story involved in Randall's framework; however, a focus will be placed on the *Outside-in Story*, or the story told to me by others, which ties back to the story-o-typing exercise of collaging experience in schools. In Randall's words, it is "... what others make of me on their own, with or (usually) without my consent" (p. 58). It will be this idea of outside-in story that participants will be asked to reflect and comment upon to dive deeper into their stories of marginalization:

What messages have been offered to them without their consent?

How has this impacted them? How have these messages shaped their identity?

Did it serve to impede them or propel them toward a more empowered future of their own creation?

The other three aspects of story will naturally be revealed through participant dialogue and through the collection of data, field texts, re-storying and story transcription, thematic analysis, and insights brought forward through conducting this inquiry.

Appendix E: CORE Tutorial Certificate of Completion

PANEL ON
RESEARCH ETHICS

Navigating the ethics of human research

TCPS 2: CORE



Certificate of Completion

This document certifies that

Jacqueline Greenough

*has completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement:
Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans
Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE)*

0405834

Date of Issue: 15 November, 2021